



DEMON IN EXILE SERIES **BOOK 7**

THE DEVIL AND KOKI-TEN

RORY SURTAIN

*"AN EPIC DEMON-SLAYING FANTASY
ADVENTURE SERIES"*

The Devil and Koki-Ten

A Demon in Exile Novel

By

Rory Surtain

Bad Flannel Divergent

Demon in Exile Series

Firefanged
The Scarred Man
Sorrow's Twin
Wind Catcher
Black Fortune
Gray Prince
The Devil and Koki-Ten
Storm Sister
Vigil Storm (Finale)

Please visit SURTAIN.NET for more info on the works of Rory Surtain.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be copied, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations for literary reviews.

Note: This is a work of fantasy fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, other-dimensional beings, and events are the products of the author's imagination and are used in a purely fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental and not indicative of any actual intention or reality.

Table of Contents

Maps

Colivar

Fugaku

Niantia (West)

Niantia (East)

Prologue

Escape

Chapter 1

Brothers in Arms

Chapter 2

Untouchable

Chapter 3

Daggerwork

Bar Sinister

The plague of War

Chapter 4

The Benediction of Hart

Chapter 5

Far Harbor

Chapter 6

Beacons

Chapter 7

Night Shift

Chapter 8

The Gifts

Chapter 9

Homecoming

Chapter 10

Homecoming

Chapter 11

Gone with the Wind

Chapter 12

Severed Limbs

Chapter 13

The Culling

Chapter 14
 Black Guard
Chapter 15
 Queen's Guard
Chapter 16
 Road Rage
Chapter 17
 The Long Way Home
Chapter 18
 Arenas and Doors
Chapter 19
 City Hunter
Chapter 20
 Dania the Gray
Chapter 21
 The Reservoir
Chapter 22
 The House of Chains
Chapter 23
 The Death House Dealer
Bar Sinister
 The House of Strife

For my double princess better half.

Realm of Colivar



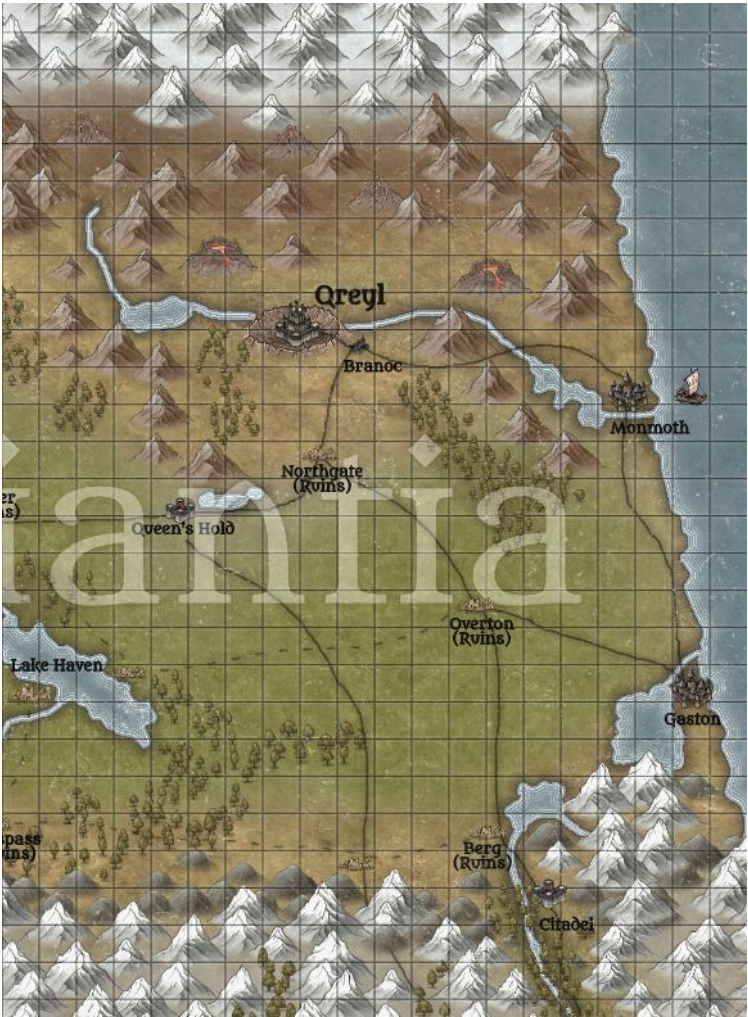
Realm of Fugaku



Realm of Niantia (West Half)



Realm of Niantia (East Half)



The choice is yours, but the plague is mine, wherever it leads.

Prologue

Escape

‘The path from desperation to hope is paved with stones of light,’ had been a common maxim of Pastor Albryn right up until the light ran out and the demons consumed him. As the steel door slammed shut behind us, I realized our path would be more of the same; the pitch-dark tunnel offered nothing for us to see.

We felt our way forward along the rough-hewn walls, stopping every ten steps to calm our breathing and double-check our count. There were turns and drops to make and plenty of other potential exits to use, but we only had one in mind, the one nearest to Sanctuary Bay and the untended lighthouse. If there were sails in the bay, they needed to know that we were still here, that we still existed in our bodies, if not our minds, and we hoped that they might carry something to sustain us all.

While there were two simple ways into the Duke’s Hold, both gates through the deep curtain wall being guarded and barricaded, others allowed for a hidden escape out into the surrounding mountains or down into the port. The route we’d been given offered us little in terms of actual escape. If all went well, our exit would drop us in the Wharf District, only blocks from our final destination. The castellan had agreed to the mission and shared the secret route knowing that our trek would be one way only. He’d barred our use of light to avoid attracting any unwanted visitors and any chance at trouble backtracking up through the tunnels.

Feth him.

I’d take my chances, going quickly rather than fading away inside

Duke Asketil's 'Prison for the Privileged.' As Captain of the Duke's Guard, I'd enjoyed the same security as a warden of sorts and could have sent another of my men on this trip, but the curtain walls were shrinking daily, and the space between them was a cauldron brewing darker thoughts for everyone to drink.

Duke Kelton, the old buzzard, lived in his tower above the growing desperation of the overfilled keeps. Still, it was his daughter, Miraa, whose eyes had seen what no one else could: sails of hope on the horizon. Of course, she'd noticed them at dusk; the setting sun outlined their presence for mere moments before they disappeared somewhere near the mouth of the enormous bay. That she still gazed out into the bay with hope after so many months was merely one more testament that Lady Miraa was far above us all.

Feth her too.

"Captain!" Corporal Jenkins tugged me back. "That's twenty."

Sure enough, sliding my foot forward, I found the edge, and my next step forward found nothing but air. I turned around and lowered myself over the edge, dropping the last five feet into another section of tunnel and landing gracefully on my ass.

"Nothing to it, Jenks. Short drop once you let go." I scurried out of the way and listened, searching for the hiss or rumble of a rill.

Jenks landed beside me, keeping his feet and pissing me off in the process. "No worries, Captain. We'll get you cleaned up once we get back."

Had I mentioned that Leni Jenkins was my younger brother and always a bit too wise for his britches? My lack of response only fed his grin. Sure, I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there, just like Jenks knew about the filth on my backside. Brothers were like that, and we'd grown up knowing each other better than ourselves.

"Start the next count," I said, trying to focus. "Fifty-five steps and then a right turn."

We'd both memorized the crude map in terms of steps and directions, not being allowed to bring a lamp or even a torch. An hour after our first drop, we found it, an underground stream that, with the pending arrival of spring, was pretending to be a river of liquid ice. Tell me a demon is going to swim up that. Not a chance.

Maybe in summer, it could throw a party in the tunnel below us, but not tonight.

“Jenks, do you feel that?”

“What? The icy water?”

“No, the lack of anything, the pitch-black spree. No worries, no whispers, no evil buzz weighing on your mind down here.”

“So, Colum, either we’re safe for the moment, or we’re already dead.” Jenks always had a knack for finding the mark.

That feeling of safety had eluded everyone in the city of Kelton for more than a year, starving hearts of hope and the will to live. Once enough of the demons had arrived, breaching the northern wall, a hunger had settled in across the city to vie with the terror that everyone already felt. As we considered the last leg of our route, Jenks and I felt nothing, and that, in and of itself, was a boon, a kind gesture ahead of whatever waited beyond the unseen rill’s frigid flow.

“Jenks, I couldn’t have said it any better. Now, let’s catch our breath and decide who’s going to jump in first.”

We both knew it would be me.

Chapter 1

Brothers in Arms

I spun, raising *Koki-Ten* in time to catch its twin as it plunged for my neck. My palm punched outward, knocking Raven back and forcing the air from her lungs. The fang-dagger tumbled out of her hand, and for a moment, the sound of it hitting the stone floor and skittering to a stop was all that existed.

Careck hissed out a laugh, “Welcome to my world, brother.” The demon lunged, diving for the free dagger.

A numbness was already settling in, an utter lack of care on my part, as the beast blurred forward. The sharp crack of its chain going taut halted its reach a foot short of its prize. The demon’s angry snarl seemed to restart time, allowing me to move. I spun and kicked, driving my boot into the side of its head and flinging it back into the corner of its prison cell.

I snatched the fang-dagger from the floor and backed out of the room. Yseria, my dark elf bodyguard, tackled Raven, pushing her back against the rough stone wall a few feet away. That cell wasn’t big enough for the four of us, and now, perhaps, the world wasn’t either. If Rae wanted the death-demon, she could have it. I had better places to be.

Feth.

I didn’t have better places to be. In fact, I had far worse, but there, time wouldn’t stop, and the daggers of broken death-demons wouldn’t shatter what little I had left of my sanity.

Feth.

Reaching the end of the corridor, I screamed for one of the Bailiff’s

men to let me out of this wing of the Duke's jail. Far behind me, I heard the slamming of the cell door, its heavy steel enough to contain whatever was left inside. The upper wing was only one flight of stairs below ground level, and soon I found myself running for the stables in search of my horse.

Feth.

The stables were a mistake; the faces of fifty sentinel-adepts, each a year or two younger than me, looked on in shock as sentinel-scout Mott Duncan tackled me to the ground. Cillian Redd, another sentinel in Company Storm, piled on at Mott's insistence, pinning my dagger-bearing arm with his full weight. More adepts joined in until I was completely disarmed and immobile. As standing orders go, it had to be a Company Storm record in terms of efficiency.

"Find Captain Hartwell, find Walker Grey," Mott doled out orders to the young men gaping around us, not easing up for a second on my arm or my neck.

"Who is it? What did he do? Who did he kill?"

The murmurs around us were honest and more than a little embarrassing for the guy at the bottom of the pile if he could even feel embarrassment. That emotion would have to get in line behind a whole murderous stack of others.

The late winter ground was soft, a trap made of mud and other pleasant things. Fifty horses had recently ridden through the exact spot where I lay sodden and shunned. And then it happened. The cold steel of a manacle bit into my wrist, and Paladin Walker Grey secured the clamp in place. My eyes chased the chain, hoping for the best, but they ended at the arm of Captain Juno Hartwell. There was no way I'd be able to drag his body far.

Not far enough. Feth.

"What brings you here, Captain?" I grasped for anything other than murder, but I'd take that too, hoping to hold a thought steady in my mind.

Juno eyed me intently, "Something about the devil and a campaign in the North. We didn't want to miss it this time."

"Nor do I. And your trip over from Lockrun?" *And how was the weather?*

“Not at all pleasant. Seems like the devil we were hunting was with us most of the way into Hamport.”

“Well, kudos to Mott for his quick thinking and his ever so tender touch.”

“What are you doing to him?” A new voice ran into the stable yard. “Captain Hartwell, why do you have Vigil Storm chained again?”

“Inquisitor Stone, if I wasn’t attached to Captain Hartwell, you’d have a difficult time keeping me away.” I offered her my best smile, but it never reached my eyes; nothing could at that moment. Nothing had in weeks.

Jillian Stone was three years younger than me. She’d be seventeen come summer, but she’d seen enough harsh moments to understand how wrong things had become. She didn’t even flinch at my sordid remark. “Master Grey, please help Vigil Storm to his feet.” Her voice held an unnaturally calm tone, like the wall of a garden in winter, offering cold stone to lean one’s cheek upon. “Everyone, please stand back, farther back, and secure those weapons.”

Walker Grey lifted me up and brushed me off, mainly rearranging the filth. I’d only just bathed, for Divine sake, and there goes my morning.

“Ara, look at me. Not at the ground, not at the chain, but at me, and remember what you did for me. Find that thread in your mind, and don’t let go.” Jillian fiddled with the raw leather band that adorned her wrist, rubbing on one of the many crude spots of blood that connected us. The sound of her voice plucked at the threads between us, lulling me from my rage.

Juno had seen enough, “Scout Duncan, give me Vigil Storm’s weapons and take the sentinels to the barracks. They’ll share space with the ducal guards until we sort things out. And track down Inquisitor Hart. We’ll need her too.”

Juno looped my broadsword over one shoulder and juggled a pair of fang-bladed daggers. To Juno, the fangs appeared identical, but I could tell which was which by holding them. They were imbued with the twin souls of a *Kjaira* death-demon, an Infernal assassin sent into my world to serve a rogue Prince of Pestilence. Once the same

shade of Black, the souls had been woven with the souls of vastly different human beings.

I'd spent the past couple of months doing everything possible to control the demon in my blade and build a relationship, one weapon to another. My heart was off-limits, as tangled and broken as it could be, so we kept things simple and at an unsafe distance. So far, I was still breathing, and for that alone, I counted my efforts as a success.

In many ways, demons and humankind are alike, devious, full of energy and strength, yet they vary in one key aspect. Every human has a heart to share in the creation of our reality. Demons do not; their souls remain lonesome and bleak because of it, bringing only death, disease, and war to whatever they touch. They lack volition. When they cross the Veil into our world, utter chaos ensues.

"Juno, for Saints' sake, don't let Raven touch either of those fangs."

I wasn't in charge at the moment but felt certain about my advice. Something had triggered her attack, and the dark soul in the fang-blade she'd been holding was the most likely candidate. They started walking me back toward our keep, and I had the feeling I was heading back to bed with a manacle for company. I couldn't waste any more time. I had things to do and places to go. We all did.

"What's the name of my sword?" said Paladin Grey.

"*Ber'yl*," I replied. "It means Night's Bane. I negotiated its service for my House much like I negotiated yours."

Grey knew all of this already. I didn't even have to tell him the first time. He was unusually fearful as he walked at my side, almost poking me to see if I was real.

"Why is *Ber'yl* so eager to board a ship heading north?"

Don't ask me how *Ber'yl* knows what it knows, but Walker Grey knew well enough to listen to its musings. Funny, I'd never thought of chaining him for it.

"Grey, are you thinking what I'm thinking? We could reach Niantia in less than a week, get some scouting done before the others arrive. The harbor is down that way." I pointed into the vast city of Hamport. Given Raven's helpful nudge, I was more than ready to sail.

"Remember what happened the last time two fethers jumped in without any proper support?" Walker Grey still sported a mess of

facial burns in testament to his hard-learned wisdom.

I halted, searching around for Jillian Stone. She was standing right beside me.

Feth.

“Jillian, please forgive me for what I said to you in the stable yard. I wasn’t quite myself.”

“Ara, what happened? You were fine an hour ago. Did bath time go that badly?” Of all the people I’d met this past month, my new inquisitor knew exactly how to keep me afloat.

Not being ready to discuss my hygiene with the young woman, I skipped straight to the heart of the matter, “Walker’s long, lost love tried to kill me. She’s been cavorting with a Nantine assassin, one bound to an alpha *Kjaira*. Its brethren attacked us a couple months ago, and we killed them all, the *Get of the Damogir* of Niantia. Paladin Grey was there, and he should know better. How could he let one live?”

I bit my tongue as several other ‘how could he’ questions piled up in my sordid mind.

Feth.

“We need to see Lord Chase,” I said, eyeing Captain Hartwell at the Paladin’s side.

“Uh, what?” said Grey.

“The Duke of Breen, please. We can’t waste another day. I’ll grab a bath later. Right now, my body matches my mind, so nobody will be surprised.”

We were led to a private meeting room in the duke’s keep and told to wait. It gave me time to stare down Juno, silently begging for the return of my weapons.

“Captain Hartwell, how is *Kol’rigan* working out?”

Juno carried a longsword across his back; the hellsword was another of my Black faction recruits, and it fit the tall captain well.

“We have our moments,” he replied, refusing to take the bait.

“My bodyguards seem to be missing,” I said. “Jillian, would you find them for me? I find myself hunted and defenseless at the moment. My wife could arrive at any moment to finish me off.”

“No,” she said. “I must stay here in case you slip, but perhaps

Captain Hartwell will return your blades.”

I had one dependable friend in the room. That she was the newest was beside the point.

Juno finally acquiesced, helping me buckle on *Exile*, my broadsword, over my right shoulder. It was a quiet weapon when not in use, as opposed to my dagger. Juno handed over one of the two fang-bladed daggers. He hadn’t really been keeping track.

As I grasped the dagger’s hilt, it shrieked in my mind, “*Magata!*”

Everyone in the room felt the unworldly pressure of the taunt and looked away.

I placed the dagger on the table. “That isn’t mine. Please hand me *Koki-Ten*.”

I sheathed the second fang-blade across my chest and rested my hand on its hilt, enjoying the aching familiar connection.

The thoughts of a death-demon skidded into my head, “*Magata, I see you’ve met First Fang, once my twin.*”

Silently, I answered back, “*What is Magata? I’ve heard that name before.*”

My adopted sister Cressida was once named *Magata* before she changed her name to Storm.

“*You are barren, empty, lacking a true owner. It should not be so.*” The demon’s words rang true yet lacked the biting zeal of its evil twin.

“*The First Fang owns Careck?*”

“*The First Fang is Careck, the ranking Get of the Damogir.*”

“*Don’t you mean the last Get of the Damogir?*”

“*There will be more. Once Careck returns to the Emperor’s city, there will be a call for ascension. The Damogir still owns plenty of my claws for those of his seed that are deemed worthy. Each claw contains a small shard of my soul to do the necessary weave.*”

“*How did Careck become the ranking Get?*”

“*He was born of the Emperor’s seed and has yet to meet his match in skill or resolve.*”

“Walker Grey, how did Raven convince Careck to play along with her?”

“Ara, there was no play about it. Careck attacked Cressida as soon as it saw her, and it took the four of them, Raven, Cress, and the dark

elves to subdue it. Raven couldn't do it alone. We had to fight it a second time outside of Lockrun, and it took the whole of Company Storm to escort it safely here, chained as it was."

I lifted my arm, "Like this?"

Grey nodded, his face suddenly uncertain.

"Then why would my wife be taking its side over her own husband?"

Grey looked me in the eye for a long moment. "Jillian, is it safe?"

Something inside me was beginning to boil as Walker Grey's mind continued to harbor an unrelenting fear. I'd never seen that before, coming from that man, and I'd never done anything to deserve it, at least not to him, recently.

"It would probably be more dangerous if you didn't free him," said my inquisitor. "You're hurting him. You're treating him like a demon, like a weapon, like a *Get of the Damogir*, and he is none of those."

Feth, right.

Awareness was half the battle. I swallowed my anger and took Jillian's hand, holding it gently until Juno nodded his consent and Paladin Grey unbolted the manacle from my wrist. Jill didn't mind, and that was half the battle, too, maybe three-quarters.

I said, "Juno Hartwell, what do you know?"

Juno had remained coy throughout our meeting this morning. He was the sharpest mind in Company Storm, and what he couldn't see, he could deduce in the most uncanny of ways. "Raven couldn't have attacked you without good reason. She's our company's Champion and yours most of all," he replied.

OK, maybe he was slipping.

I pointed at the other dagger in the room, "Raven was aiming that for the back of my neck."

"And yet, Ara, you're still here. Did you forget what Sentinel Early Vale told you, told us all, about who was the most dangerous person in Company Storm? Didn't you believe him?"

Early had said that it wasn't even close.

My stomach plummeted for the second time that morning. "So, Rae was protecting Careck from me." I returned to my original question, "Captain Hartwell, please tell me why."

"She was obviously confused," said Walker Grey.

Not what I wanted to hear. Not even close.

"She's not confused. Not at all. And she wasn't protecting Careck." Juno was as sure as I'd ever seen him. "Ara, Raven was protecting you."

Disrupting my thoughts, Koki-Ten interjected, "*The captain is probably right.*"

I took my hand off of the hilt, its comfort having fled. "The beast had one good arm, and it was chained to the wall. It would have been a clean, quick kill. For a *Kjaira*, that would have been a first."

I knew more than anyone the difficulty in taking down a wounded death-demon, and Raven had stepped in. *Why?*

Jillian Stone held my hand and wept, seeing something none of us could fathom. "I watched it destroy my father, and it would have destroyed you too."

"Jill, your father couldn't have known. He couldn't have guarded against the vision of the Infernal plague that took your mother."

"I know. But afterward, he had to end her suffering. She was gone, her mind nothing more than chaos and disease, and he had to wield the blade that freed her."

I had known that the plague's visions had destroyed her mother's sensitive mind but hadn't realized the rest. Vigil Stone's fall into disrepair made more sense to me now, and Jill's mention of the plague's distant effects forced me to act.

I held her hand. Using this physical link, I dove into her heart and mind, searching for anything I might have missed, any scars from her exposure to the alien visions that lived in my head. The initial damage had been harsh, but what I found, new strands of gold and gray, formed a mesh of psychic armor in a familiar weave. It was a gift. Our weeks together had healed her and made her stronger. I breathed a sigh of relief and let go.

More than a year before, my sister Hart had suffered from an Infernal vision as well, a careless moment on my part, and lately, she spent her days afraid to be around me. She'd offered hints, almost begging me to look inside her, to notice the wounds, knowing that I could heal her with my touch. And yet, I'd thought she needed

privacy with her growing love for Sevin Martell and her constant anxiety whenever she was near me. I had been elsewhere and likely missed the main reason for it all.

I wasn't an inquisitor, but I should have figured it out. In that same vein, I should know why Raven Ylamil, my wife and Beloved, had tried to stab me in the back.

"Jillian Stone, from the moment we've met, I have failed to inform you of how slow I can be, and by sharing your father's ordeal, you have opened my eyes to yet another unforgivable blunder of mine. We must remedy it together. In the meantime, please tell me what the death of your mother has to do with Careck, the First Fang of the Damogir."

"It was my mistake," said Walker Grey. "I wasn't supposed to let you off the chain until Raven arrived this morning to explain things. I didn't realize the danger, and, well, folks were a bit on edge around you."

With my blank stare blanketing the room, Juno Hartwell finally ended my ignorant ordeal. "Ara, there's a good reason that everyone is terrified of you right now. We've been on the road fighting your near twin for weeks, looking into those same haunted eyes and encountering nothing but a beast. As broken and dangerous as Careck is, it almost destroyed Raven to bring the man, obviously your brother, across the entire continent to meet you."

Chapter 2

Untouchable

Needing a moment, I sent everyone out. The dagger on the table before me took on a new meaning, one of connection as well as hatred. I held perfectly still, counting in my head but quitting when that failed to lead me anywhere better. I'd seen nothing but a threat, an evil assassin bred to harm my family and me. The manacles and the wounds should have been a hint, but the glowing red eyes and inhuman voice buried whatever existed behind them.

"You are of his seed, but not his Get. Untouchable, your heart and soul denied the chaining of your being," said Koki-Ten. *"That is why you must travel north to confront the Damogir and end the Infernal contract."*

"Why do you care?" I replied in my head.

"Lacking a heart, I am unable to care, except through the heart of the Damogir. The Emperor ignores its cries for an ending to that which it started, and it bleeds for the realm it has destroyed."

"Niantia is magata," I thought. *"Bereft of a heart and the people to fill it."*

"It's a fitting name for the realm; its ruins and vast emptiness offer little hope for those that still live there."

I released the hilt of Koki-Ten and picked up the other dagger, Careck's fang, *"Do I have a sister?"*

"You killed the Second Fang of the Damogir, leaving her ashes buried in the hills," a new voice assaulted my head. It was similar yet plainly different from the soul shard of Koki-Ten. The soul that filled this dagger was a weave of a shard of Koki-Ten and Careck's original

human essence. The entity existed separately, yet connected, in both the dagger and the beast in the cells below.

"Bengla was from the seed of the Damogir?"

"Yes. Otherwise, one could not wield the fang relic."

I hardly knew the woman but would mourn. *"Are there others?"*

"Always, magata."

To be magata was to be empty, barren, cursed, but to be bound by a death-demon was an abomination.

"You've met them?" I said.

"One. She was most pathetic, yet still lives, the bonds of a phantom brood sustain her."

"The bonds of my brood sustain her, yet you tried to kill her, didn't you?"

"Of course, but a brood enforcer stepped in to protect her."

"It was the enforcer of my brood. The same champion that stepped in on your behalf this morning. Do you admit a debt?"

"I must, but I cannot release my grasp on your brother, for that is what you seek, is it not?"

I wasn't that naïve. *"No. I only ask that you sleep until you are called."*

"That, I can do."

I placed the fang-dagger gently on the table and screamed, pushing fury and pain in every direction as I tried to bleed off the twisted turn of events. I opened the window, letting a cold, end-of-winter breeze carry the rage away as quickly as it poured off my brow. Again, I began counting and, on every heartbeat, checked whether or not I had regained custody of my mind.

Feth.

A hand touched my shoulder, empty of any weapon yet full of control.

Lady Annette spoke first, "Lord Storm, Ara, we received your messages and had thought you were gone from our shores with the morning tide."

A remarkable person to know, Lady Annette Chase had become a friend and had helped with Jillian Stone's recovery in my absence. She deserved far more than I could share.

“My apologies, Duke and Lady Breen. It seems that I’ve been having one of those days we all dread, and I shouldn’t have gotten out of bed.”

I waved my hand, the red and white bandage covering a wound from yet another dagger. It was one I deserved and understood completely, a parting gift from a blind woman and a Black curse.

“Your company has arrived in full,” said Lord Chase. He was older than his wife by at least a decade, maybe two, but still her equal in energy and foresight. “I have met with Captain Hartwell in planning the coming invasion. He is as eager as you to sail north.”

“We will not leave Hamport undefended. A section of fifty sentinel-adepts arrived this morning and will remain here along with a pair of Paladins to lead them.”

“And the wagon in the stable yard?”

The wagon contained a weasel’s weighty ransom in gold.

“My business in Stonnberg went better than expected. The Nantine children, the orphans and refugees, will need a place to live and go to school. I hope that the wagon holds enough to fund the endeavor.”

“Lord Storm,” Chase replied. “It holds five times the amount needed. What should we do with the rest?”

“Build a bigger school and a Vigil’s Keep so that Company Storm has a place to live and train when the coming war is over.”

“Lord Storm, we’ve already decided to sponsor your official presence here. What else can we do to help?”

“If Annette would be so kind as to sit with me for a while, I think that will get me through the day. That, and a dinner tonight where you can both meet my wife and extended family.”

The Duke smiled and nodded to his partner, leaving us alone.

“Ara, what does your wife think of Jillian Stone?” Lady Breen was an insightful person and usually more subtle in her interrogation of others.

Needing someone to ask the right questions, ones that I could answer, I was counting on her. The room was private; the only other participant was the breeze from the open window.

“We haven’t discussed Jillian, but Raven tried to stab me with that

earlier this morning.” I spun the fang-dagger as it slumbered innocently on the polished wooden table.

“She tried to kill you over Jillian Stone? Doesn’t that seem a bit harsh, if not completely short-sighted?”

“Well, I compete well when it comes to being both. I thought she was siding with my brother.”

“And what does your brother say about all this?”

“We haven’t really spoken, ever, but I’m looking forward to the conversation.”

“So, who have you spoken with besides Jillian?”

“There seems to be a period of adjustment needed for my extended family. They’re concerned that I will leave them, and yet they are terrified to be around me.” I showed Annette my bruised wrist where the manacle had been, offering all the colors of my world.

“So, you’re saying that tonight’s dinner will be an even better event than our last one?” Lady Annette reached for my other wrist and began untying the scarf I had there.

“One can surely hope. Of course, it all depends on the seating arrangements, and I already have some requirements in that regard.”

It was amazing how easily I could brighten the day of Lady Breen, and she did the same for me as she fit the scarf around my bruised wrist and gently tied it into place.

“Now it’s official,” she pronounced. “The bloody, beautiful scarf has sealed our friendship. Did you not hear it speak?”

I took a moment to smile and listen to the scarf. For a man that only listens to weapons, it wasn’t such a stretch. Annette seemed perfectly pleased with my reaction.

The scarf was a Royal keepsake rescued from a trove of relics and had little value as far as I could discern, other than it had belonged to a queen. The Weasel of Stonnberg had collected it and given me its limited backstory. Its exotic, smooth gray silk held a foreign design speckled with brown-red blood. It carried the psychic imprint of a formidable soul. I wore it as a comforting guide and for the warmth it seemed to impart.

“I won it in Stonnberg and have named it *Summer*.”

"Ara, do you have a habit of naming personal objects?"

"Only those that have souls, or imprints of souls," I kept my answers honest, giving her exactly what she wanted.

Annette was a collector too, a glutton for information, acting as a spy for her husband. "And what do you call that gruesome blade on your back?"

"*Exile*. It holds the soul of an Infernal Warlord and consumes the blood of its victims." I smiled when I said it, giving her pause to decipher the truth of it.

"And the dagger across your chest?"

"Its name is *Koki-Ten*. It's imbued with the soul of an alpha death-demon."

She offered her winning smile in a trade for the uncertainty she felt. "Is it more dominant than you?"

I fiddled with the scarf. "In its current state, no."

That response left her puzzled. She pointed at the dagger on the table. "What's its name?"

"That blade isn't mine. It belongs to my brother, Careck. It is called *First Fang*."

"The brother to whom you've never spoken? How do you know this weapon's name?"

"Our sister told me its name right before I killed her." I watched the luster slip from Annette's eyes.

"You killed your sister?"

"Two months ago. She was an assassin for the Damogir of Niantia, sent to kill my wife, and I only found out today that she was also my sister, right after I tried to kill my brother and my wife tried to kill me. Makes a lot of sense when you think about it, doesn't it?"

"Ara, what makes sense in any of that?"

"Only how bad I'm feeling right now."

"Do you have things you must do today?" she asked.

"Only a thousand or so."

"Great, then let's have lunch before you get too busy."

Lady Breen guided me to a private dining room, one completely empty of all servants and guards. Located on an upper level of the Duke's Keep, it offered large windows and pale wood floors to

brighten the room. It reminded me of Lady Annette. The whole city, stretching down to its misty harbor, could be seen below and beyond the hold's thick walls. The dining table was intimate in that it only had room for four but was set for two on adjacent sides.

"Ara, please give me a moment to send for our lunch. Enjoy the magnificent view."

I took that moment to find the nearest bathroom and scrubbed my face. Any little bit would help.

I was well aware of how this private lunch might look. Upon Lady Annette's return, I asked, "Will your husband be joining us?"

"He may. We rarely have guests in this wing due to security concerns. We enjoy the privacy here without his bodyguards listening in on every word."

"My aunt and uncle are in the security business, as am I, when I think about it. Why don't you have your own bodyguards following you around?"

"I've given them a break knowing that you can protect me while we're together." Her powers of flirtation far exceeded my own.

"How would you know that? I mean, I'm a demon-slayer, not a bodyguard."

"I've spent the last two weeks with a talkative young woman, one that worships the ground that you walk on, and yet, Jillian tells the most unbelievable tales when it comes to you and your security business. Based on her word alone, one might think you weren't a Vigil, but a prince."

"Don't tell my wife. She thinks that I'm a devil, and I'm not sure that she's wrong."

A short rap on the door preceded a quick parade of servants and trays through the room. The table was decked out for four, and soon Lord Chase entered the room, escorting a real princess, my wife, Raven Ylamil-Storm.

"I hope we aren't interrupting anything here," he said.

The jovial remark took hold of Annette as she replied, "Anton, that is a complete lie, and we haven't even started our lunch."

"Quite right, Dear. Have you met this young lady? It seems she's looking for her husband, and I had to ask her to leave her sword

outside in case we found him in here with you.”

Except for crossing daggers this morning, I hadn’t seen Raven in more than a month; our paths had been going in decidedly opposite directions. I blamed her for that and for the fact that she was beautiful and clean, smelling of roses and myrrh, while I had a scent more in common with a horse.

I stood and held out my hand, its blood-stained bandages seeping wet, and trusted Juno Hartwell’s logic more than my heart.

“You’re a mess,” said Rae. “And you haven’t changed a bit.” She took my hand and the chair to my left.

Annette frowned at Rae’s choice of words. “I think you might find that Ara’s life has changed considerably in these last few weeks. Especially this morning, from what I gather.”

“Lady Annette, my wife speaks of the one thing that she covets and yet shuns for the fear it instills in everyone. The courage and the friendship that you have shown anchors me to a bay at a time when I must run out into the storm.”

“But you will be coming back after the war? You even asked Anton to build you a keep.”

“Knowing the wisdom that holds my brother in chains, I may not be able to return after all. He’s a danger to everyone, unaware of what he is or does.”

“Careck knows what he is and what he does,” said Raven. “Even when he isn’t in control, he’s still there, and his heart is still there to anchor his reality.”

“And mine is not?” I replied. “Perhaps, I was right all along.”

“About what?” said Rae.

“About you and my brother. As a *Get of the Damogir*, he is a monster, but you think that you can control him, chaining him to a wall and pretending it’s only the Black that’s making him do what he does. Maybe a chain can be broken, and maybe he will change, but his heart will never return.

“Rae, I know your heart, and I’ve felt what exile can do to it. I saw the emptiness in my sister’s heart on the road from Berykholt. It mirrors mine when you look at me that way.”

Lord Chase tried to slow the pace of my growing fury, “Ara, are

you the son of the Damogir?"

"I was born of his seed, but the Damogir only recognizes those he chains to a death-demon as his *Get*. Being unchained, I'm the one that must end the threat of the Infernal plague before it breaches our Realm's borders."

I paused, glancing at Raven and examining the table before me, wishing Hart Storm was here to fully explain my sad existence.

Trusting the privacy of the moment, I spilled my heart on the clean tablecloth, "And yet, I am blocked in my path to ruin, wed to a champion that can protect everyone except her mate. I've been declared untouchable and gray of heart, ever on the tongues of demons. The word used in Niantia is 'magata.' Can you imagine such a place that would have a word for my condition? My heart is lost in exile, yet I'm still willing to take responsibility for my choices. I search for those that might accept me before I sail off, screaming into the wind."

The Duke could only nod and look to his wife. Lady Breen seemed more than satisfied by my outburst and the fervor behind it, but she held back any comment, waiting for Raven to react.

"Laila thinks we made a mistake," said Raven. "That we overreacted by sending you away from Cressida and into your war."

My war.

"Rae, what do you think? Or do you want to hear the body count first?" I was shaking, the month and the morning catching up with me in far too many ways, brought home by the cold-filtered stare of my wife.

Lord Chase cut in, "Lord Storm, do you have some connections with the Gray Houses? I've been trying to harness the competition and the hidden trade that goes on in the Lower Districts of Hampport."

The Duke didn't know what kind of horse he was trying to saddle, but his distraction was well-meant. In Colivar, the dividing line between the Gold and Gray was as fine as a rusty razor.

"Lord Chase, I do. If you have a specific problem, I'm glad to hear of it. If not, I would suggest that you keep your distance from those that play by their own set of rules."

"But they must abide by our laws and taxes. Everyone does."

“Duke, think of the coin you will save on bodyguards and the peaceful sleep you will continue to have by not causing undue grief with the local faction of Grays.”

Lord Chase was serving lunch cold, it seemed, “Lord Storm, do you support their interests over mine?”

Raven’s hand suddenly covered mine, “I was wrong. And we have all suffered for it. Laila told us what you did to the Hamport Grays, to the assassins they’d sent, and that you had to give them Ayla to make peace.”

“Ara, who is Ayla?” Lady Breen was in step with Raven and knew her husband’s drive perfectly well. She didn’t know mine.

“Ayla Storm is my younger sister. She’s fifteen and lives in Bridgeton. She was with me in Bridgeton when forty Hamport assassins ambushed us. The hitmen had consumed a death-demon’s blood to mask their presence and strengthen their abilities. We fought them for our lives.”

That was all vague enough but true. Annette didn’t seem to think otherwise.

The Duke’s concern responded first, “You’ve fought against the Grays of Hamport? Is this city safe for you now?”

He’d known of another assassination attempt, one that occurred on my first day here. A bolt from a Black-driven bowman had managed to hit the edge of a shield right in front of me while a squad of the Duke’s Horse Guards waited to escort my company to the Duke’s Hold.

“Lord Chase, I’ve reached an agreement with the Grays that allows me to protect all of our interests, and that wagon full of gold is a payment of sorts from one boss that wishes to contribute to the greater good.”

The Duke didn’t hide a broad grin. “Well then, let’s eat.”

Annette gave his hand a quick rub and fought to keep a straight face. Looking between the two, I realized that I’d been played, suckered for information that I’d meant to keep hidden.

Raven continued to cover my hand with hers. “I meant Careck as a gift for you, not a threat. If you must be elsewhere, I don’t want you to be alone.”

I believed her. "Is Yseria OK?"

"Of course. You can see Yser after your bath."

"Not during?" I said.

"No, not unless she likes to watch."

"Are we talking about the same person?"

"After OUR bath," Rae spoke with a clear finality.

"OK." I knew when I was beaten.

You saw what I did there, didn't you? You can learn a lot from a crafty Duke.

Chapter 3

Daggerwork

OUR bath time came first, and it helped wash away the forbidding distance between us. Everything in my life started and ended with Raven and our upside-down relationship. Our love, gently woven together in our souls, was a constant connection yet achingly oppressed between our hearts. Physically, we could still bond, and we did so with a pent-up intensity as Rae's tears warmed the tepid bath water. It was a moment of peace in a day meant to measure our readiness for the coming war.

"It seems that I have a true sister," I said, toweling off. "Are you pleased?"

"Pleased by the woman? Or what it means? To each question, I would answer, 'No.' Cressida being your sister by blood will only make you care for her more. The fact that you're also of the Damogir's bloodline, while it explains plenty, will only draw you deeper into the ruinous pit of Niantia."

"So, you're married to a prince of Gray, Gold, and Mad Black. Take your pick." I meant it as a jest.

"Didn't Hart already bleed you with *Sorrow*?"

The fang-dagger *Sorrow* consumed the Mad Black, the curse of corruption that ruined my better days. I wasn't perfect. *Who knew?*

"Yes, but I haven't repaid her, and the war is about to begin."

Risking my newly clean body, I made another foray into the Bailiff's rat-scented world of stone corridors and heavy steel bars. The shift had changed, avoiding further embarrassment as I was guided without comment into the dim domain of the upper wing.

Only Yseria came along, which I thought was the safest bet.

The man in the cell didn't look anything like he did this morning, his eyes were a more natural gray, and he didn't lunge at the door as we opened it. The manacle was still in place on his one remaining wrist. His right arm ended abruptly just below his shoulder.

We weren't twins, not identical in any way, but the strong resemblance was there in our eyes, our hair, and our similar builds. His mouth was different, fuller, and his nose had been broken more than once. I checked his ears for any marks without being too obvious. Saint Yseria would have never let me hear the end of it if she'd noticed. Careck was clean.

"What happened to his arm?"

"Raven removed it in a scuffle outside the gates of Lockrun," said Yser. "I doubt we could have gotten him here otherwise."

I guided Yser gently back out of the cell and asked her to lock the door. I'd never met any real family before and couldn't even remember my mother's face; she'd abandoned me at the under-ripe age of seven.

"Careck, are you there?"

No response.

I drew Careck's fang-blade, my connection to the soul of the beast that sat before me, and pushed on it with a small spark of fury. "*Wake up and let him go.*"

The man jumped to his feet, his chain stretching taut, and he looked around in confusion. "Who are you, and where is Lady Raven?"

As introductions go, it offered plenty.

"I'm Ara Storm, and Lady Raven is my wife."

"You're the lucky bastard! She should have been mine."

"What the *FETH* is that supposed to mean?"

"The Damogir promised her to me as a reward for being First Fang. He demanded her from the King of Bastian, but Ylamil wouldn't budge."

"Why would the Damogir want Raven Ylamil?"

"Maybe to avoid a war? I don't know. I'm a *Get of the Dam*, not a diplomat. For whatever reason, he wanted the daughter of the dark

elf King, and I was more than happy to have her. Of course, the Damogir would give her his seed first, but I didn't mind going second."

Careck crashed into the wall behind him. I'd heard more than enough about their plans for my wife and enjoyed his new discourse on how to help him find his missing teeth. We were looking less and less alike by the minute.

Bengla, our blood sister, had been a bit morose and secretive, but I'd never felt like punching her in the face, even after she'd stabbed me with the Second Fang of *Koki-Ten*. *Exile* had removed her head, and that was that. I'm not sure I was even involved in the decision.

Raven was a rare half-elf and a scion of Ylamil, the ruling bloodline of the dark elves. As such, she couldn't be from the seed of the Damogir. She harbored the soul of a *Kjaira* around her heart and was a fierce champion because of it. How that came about and how the Damogir knew about it was still beyond me, but he probably viewed her as a threat.

"You're a quick one," said Careck. "How's your hand?"

"It'll be fine by morning. Did you find your teeth?"

"The rats will try to eat them and choke. I should have a nice breakfast tomorrow."

"Don't get too comfortable here. We're going north to Niantia as soon as the ships are loaded, and the tide has turned."

"You think that you can break the Damogir's grip?"

"There's only one way to find out. Are you going to be trouble?"

"Is Raven coming along?"

"Yes," I said. "She won't take 'No' for an answer."

Oh, feth.

"Then, yes, I will be trouble. It sounds like a fun—," Careck landed on his cot, abruptly out cold, and my hand suddenly needed an extra day to heal.

We weren't twins, not even close, and somehow that made me feel better.

"Who's next?" said Yser as she opened the cell door. We had a busy afternoon planned.

"Sevin Martell. But if he causes any trouble, you'll have to hit

him.”

The Martells hadn't yet left the city with Hart when they'd been intercepted and escorted back to the Duke's Hold. I should never have decided to send them away in the first place, but second or third choices were always in the plan. The mental state of Vigil Stone would have to heal on its own for the time being.

“What happened to your hand?” said Keil Martell.

“It met my brother,” I replied. “Right after I did.”

Keil nodded, “He's a piece of work. We'll be glad to see him gone.”

The group waited for my response, hoping for an affirmation or a clear idea of how I would deal with Careck. Besides Hart and the Martells, Raven, Walker, and Jillian sat around the table, admiring the blood and bruising on my right hand.

“Careck is mine to deal with, but that's not why we're here. I have some family business to attend before we sail, and please notice that I said ‘we.’ Everyone in Company Storm will be sailing north to Niantia.”

Eager nods were given.

I turned to both of my inquisitors, “Hart and Jillian, I need you to examine each other from a mental health standpoint. Tell me everything you see that is relevant to our coming mission and the Infernal plague.”

Keil Martell grinned, but I knew he'd never cross the line with his comments while his brother and Raven were in the room. Sevin placed his hand on his older brother's shoulder, to be sure.

Hart went first, letting her third eye and the whispers in her head do their work, “As I said before, Jillian has gained a strong connection to Ara. She has suffered trauma from a plague vision, but it has healed completely.”

Hart hesitated a moment, “I can see threads in place that seem to make her mind stronger. Ara, how is that possible? It doesn't look like a brood weave.”

“It's not. It's something else entirely.” I wouldn't dare to describe it with Raven in the room. “Now, Jillian, what about Hart?”

Jillian's expression turned sad. “Her mind looks a lot like my

mother's did after she caught a glimpse of the Infernal plague. There's been some healing, but not enough, nowhere near enough for her to function without distraction. How does she sleep?"

"She doesn't," said Sevin. "Or poorly at best."

This time Keil pouted. He'd heard the news already from his brother and was as concerned as Sevin.

"How long ago did it happen?" said Jillian. "The plague visions?"

"A year and a half," I replied, dreading to hear it from Hart's lips.

"My father had to end my mother's suffering after only two months. Her mind had failed completely; the visions had consumed her."

Jillian handed me the dagger *Sorrow*, and I asked everyone to leave the room, except for Hart. Keil, a man with a strong dose of faith in his Vigil, dragged Sevin out the door.

I moved around to sit beside my first sister, taking her hand in mine. I studied her face, watching it relax with the relief my touch gave her. "Why are we so much alike?" I said.

Hart had slept last night holding my hand. Not for my benefit, but for hers. I was a complete dolt.

"We are both orphans. Perhaps that is our common ground," she replied, offering a far too distant answer.

"It was my mistake. Can you forgive me?"

Hart would always say that we were even, but beneath her words, her head ached, and her mind rattled with a curse that I'd carelessly let slip before I knew what a plague vision could do.

Hart hesitated. Tears rolled down her cheeks in fear. "What will you do?"

My touch could heal her heart and carry away the pain without any thought on my part, but it would take far more to heal her mind, and it would change her. I had learned, and now so must she.

"I will carve the vision from your mind and replace it with something whole. It will take time to heal."

"What will I lose?"

"Hopefully, your ability to hate me." It was a selfish wish as much as a guess.

"I don't hate you," she whispered.

"We both know that's not true. Sevin almost loathes me for the damage I've done. You suffer far more than he does, so how could you not?"

Hart broke down and sobbed, "Why would you do that? Why would you leave? What did I do wrong that you would abandon me?"

Being unable to stomach their concerns, I'd ridden away from everyone.

"Hart, you didn't do anything wrong. I'm sorry for leaving as I did."

"You didn't merely leave. You let go."

I unwrapped the bandage from my hand. The wound in my palm was deep but already healing, and it only leaked a bit of blood.

"When did I let you go?"

We both knew the answer to that but had to return to the scene of the crime together.

"When you let go of your heart after the *Get of the Damogir* attacked. You haven't been the same since, and instead of rebuilding your connections, you left them severed. Don't you know how that hurts us all? Are you ever planning on coming back?"

"Hart, like you, I can heal others, but not myself."

"I will only hate you more and more until you fully return. It hurts me so." She was crying in full, pouring forth far more than this moment's frustration and sadness. "You were the first person that I ever loved after my mom died, and like her, one day, you were suddenly gone. I've felt horribly alone ever since. It isn't fair."

"Let me heal you," I said, picking up the dagger. It felt perfectly familiar in my hand. It would always be a part of me, a connection of souls, not hearts, one reliable weapon to another.

"No." Hart pulled her hand from mine. "And I won't forgive you. Not until you come back to us all."

Cat's words echoed in my head. She had run away, unable to bear what Hart perceived. Cat would only forgive me when I had healed myself and come home. Being an orphan, I'd grown to have my own vast extended family, and one terrible day, I'd lost it all because of an alpha *Kjaira* and the *Get of the Damogir*.

"Hart, what if I can't? Would you suffer my loss a second time? Or

a third?" I'd lost count.

"Can you make me forget?" she said, quickly adding, "The visions and the pain, not you."

"Give me your hand." It was an order from her older brother, and she complied.

Sorrow bit, placing the smallest slice in her palm, and I covered it with mine.

"Did you feel it?" I asked.

Hart's blind, pearlescent eyes still leaked, but the tears had slowed. "Not at all."

"What about now?" I dove into our blood connection.

The crude weaving allowed me to converse with the dark entity in her head. Her mind was a garment, torn and ragged, fraying by the day. Threads here and there in a slowly fading gray were signs of an underdone attempt to hold things together. It matched the young woman's appearance when I'd met her on the street corner in Maidenhall two years ago, but it was a lie. Her mind wasn't torn then. She seemed to have retreated under the visions' chaos and pain into an earlier image of herself, a poorer one, an orphan with a fever. I burned each dark root, spinning psychic fire from my fury, and I chased the Infernal disease as it awoke and scurried about, burrowing into her mind an attempt to hide anew.

I wasn't alone in there. A shadow, gray and willing, plucked the strings with a hiss as the chaotic wounds scrambled away into yet another corner. A face, Hart's, older and pocked with blisters, looked back at me with a chilling smile. Nothing in that infinite room terrified me more.

By the time I was done, Hart was sitting in my lap like a child. We were both soaked in sweat and tears as I surveyed the damage and repairs from a safer distance. She was clean, her mind scoured of the torturous visions and the dark energy they'd been bleeding. I pushed everything I had left through the link of our blood, our hands still clasped, and tied one more small knot in place before releasing her.

She leaned her head against mine, "Don't let go. For both of our sakes."

"Shush, now. Sleep."

“I forgive you,” she whispered, putting all of my best efforts to shame.

I carried her soundlessly from the room.

Bar Sinister

The plague of War

"I need a drink," I said. "Hit me again."

"I already did. Twice," said Memeton, an Arch Priest of the Infernal Dominion. "Next round is on the High Prince, if I'm not mistaken."

"How much longer will he be keeping us in limbo? I feel like I'm going to burst if I don't get out of here soon."

"The High Prince had the same thought and told me so. Here, drink this."

A bottle bearing the sigil of my Infernal House, Hal-Raekorn, stood on the bar counter in front of me. Its contents spun with bubbles of the blackest light.

"What Cycle?" I asked.

"The Cycle of your birth. Now drink it, Younger."

"What are we celebrating? I'd rather get the feth out of here and rejoin the Cycle's campaigns."

"We're celebrating your birthday if you'd ever shut up and drink."

Rei-Seeck showed me her hands. They were empty, giftless, and dry.

The cork was off, so I took a sip, the seeds of blood rolling on my tongue. I set the bottle down empty. The gift, for that is what it was, knocked me to the floor.

Rei-Seeck spun, the death-demon's claws extending to follow me down as Memet tackled her and drove her into the wall across the room.

"Don't touch," he said, staring down the death-demon. "Your

game is over.”

A chair crashed across his shoulder, staggering him.

“Let her touch me all she wants,” I said. “It’s my birthday party, after all.” I raised my head and roared, shattering every bottle in the place. My horns, full of new twists and turns, tilted forward to balance out the unfamiliar weight of my newly grown wings. My head brushed the ceiling. “We’re going to need a bigger bar.”

Memet dragged himself up, back into his seat. “I should have been expecting that. How do you feel?”

The growth cycle of Hal-Raekorn the Younger was over. As the Plague of Hal-Raekorn, I was now one step below Elder. It had been a fast climb.

“Almost full,” I burped.

Memet hadn’t been expecting that answer either.

“He’s been hoarding,” said the *Kjaira* in our midst. She sauntered to my side. “Thinks he’ll be allowed to take it with him when he returns to the Cycle.”

“He can’t. He’d never fit through the door,” said Memet. “How will he burn it off?”

“That’s the question of the Cycle,” she replied.

Chapter 4

The Benediction of Hart

“Sevin stays here with Hart. He can have command of the fifty sentinel-adepts. Keil can act as his second and keep Lord Chase informed of any threats.” I was laying everything out between courses at the duke’s formal dinner.

All of my officers were present except for Hart, who was resting after the afternoon’s ordeal. Jillian had given her another examination and thought she looked inexplicably better, but Jill didn’t know Hart as I did, nor did she see what I saw when I dove through the blood connection. I had begun healing Jill within moments of the plague vision’s attack on her mind and spent weeks with a hand resting on hers. Hart’s situation had been the complete opposite and far uglier for it.

My mood matched that of the room, one of concern, hidden worry, and a determined view toward our coming foray up the coast. We all enjoyed the evening’s bright, sure company, knowing we would soon stand on foreign ground.

As family, Raven and Yseria sat on either side of me, filling in for my bodyguards. Raven had the ear of Lord Chase while Yser, on my right, chuckled along with Walker Grey. Jillian sat across the table, enjoying her place between Lady Chase and Juno Hartwell.

Juno was all business. He’d been enjoying a ready supply of sentinel-sergeants and Paladins to help sort the Storm Company men. With all the right folks in the room, he did his job admirably, “What about our horses?”

Horses rode the top of my list as well. “We’ll bring them in after

us. This is Hamport. They must have dozens of floating corrals.”

“Ara, we call them luggers. They're big enough to move a hundred horses with feed. We should send them out ahead of you. They're terribly slow.” The Duke knew his business, making the dinner well worth our time. “We'll spread your sixty across three ships and add a barge full of food and other supplies.”

“Send two barges. If the city of Kelton is under siege, they'll need all the help they can get, and it might ease the thought that we're showing up uninvited. It won't go to waste.”

“Done. We'll crack the warehouses tonight. We can launch all three support ships tomorrow and run an escort up the coast. Your company's transports can shove off the day after.”

“And your local preparations?” I asked.

“The hold's gates and walls have been inspected and are in good order. Ignoring the old outer wall, the city's middle wall is undergoing significant repairs but should be ready in three months. It will be defensible by then.”

I looked across at Annette. “Stonnberg will always have Paladins, so don't be brave. I expect you to head east at the first sign that the Infernal Horde might overrun this city. In the meantime, our job will be to secure the walls of Kelton and push east toward Bastian. If we do that, we should keep any near-term threats busy and away from Hamport.”

“And the long-term threats?” Lady Breen wasn't enjoying the dinner conversation for once, but her simple question managed to quiet the entire room.

“We won't know what to expect until we land, but from what Careck told Raven, there's at least one sizable Horde roaming the plains of Niantia and another guarding the Emperor's city of Qreyl.”

Guarding and consuming.

“Ara, what can a Vigil company of sixty hope to accomplish against the Horde?”

“Given defensible walls or a headless attack, we might hold against a demonic foe many times our number, and with horses, we should be able to outmaneuver the Horde in the open as we move inland. I wouldn't mind stringing it along and pulling it away from

any remaining cities or towns. A lot depends on what's driving it."

Annette was locked into the thread of explanations. "And what drives it?"

"Hunger in the main, but with a Hell-knight or three, it might follow orders of a strategic or tactical nature," I said.

"Such as?"

"Such as clearing a path south into Colivar or the Realm of Fugaku."

"And how would we know if it did?"

"The Order of the Vigil will be keeping watch."

And here, she'd reached the end of her line of questioning, offering the breaker, "Will that be good enough?"

I couldn't lie to her. Not anymore. The Gray Prince had been forcibly retired. "No, Lady Breen. Not if all Hell breaks loose in Niantia, but that is why we're going north, to make sure that that doesn't happen."

Raven covered my hand, a mild hint about my candor, but I'd been holding back on the truth for far too long.

"What my brother has failed to mention is that he is the anointed Wind Catcher of the Fuga Crown. As a magnet for the Black, he will catch the Black Wind and hold it for as long as it takes to destroy it." Hart Storm stood at the door, her arm held gently by Sevin Martell.

She wore a beautiful blue dress, the work of Lord Chase's expert tailor, and it was a gift for everyone who saw it. Dressed as a princess, Hart Storm could sense our reactions and hear our stares. She smiled, shocking everyone with an expression rarely seen in more than a year.

Juno jumped up first, offering his seat beside Jillian Stone. "Inquisitor, are you well?"

Hart seemed to hesitate as she took her place at the table, finding a memory among the haystack of her mind. "Thank you, Captain Hartwell. I'm feeling much better, and I see that I've arrived in time."

"In time for what?" I asked carefully.

"To correct you, my brother. You're completely mistaken if you're thinking of leaving me behind on your march into ruin."

I'd already discussed this with Raven. At some point, I would have

to move apart and track down the source of the plague, keeping everyone else at a safe distance. It was inevitable, but I wouldn't be traveling alone. Not with Careck in tow. He was family and the best kind to have on such a trip, a sibling that I didn't mind killing and one that certainly felt the same way about me.

I replied, "Hart, tell me what you see, and I will do likewise."

She kept her smile. "We all have a choice to perceive the world in our own way. I see the eyes of many that love you, and yet, you blind yourself with the Black and the need to exist as an orphan, thinking that it will allow you to step safely into the plague and its insanity. Brother, you should take a hard look around this room."

Being the most perceptive woman that I knew, Hart was my inquisitor for a good reason. She was the only one who could challenge me openly and without fear that I would take offense. I followed her advice, scanning the table and the boundaries of the room and finding all the relationships I feared to carry with me.

All the connections were there, from Hart and Yseria to Jillian and Annette, Raven, and my companions in Company Storm. There was something unbreakable about them, and perhaps that's what scared me, the unbending claim on a heart that couldn't heal itself. Pulling back, I searched for the comfortable gray that had become such a part of my soul, and, checking the room again, I found that I wasn't alone after all.

One woman, in particular, caught my eye. She was standing against the wall behind Hart, older but with a familiar face covered in the blisters of a winter plague and eyes that gazed upon Hart in amazement. It was that look with its obvious adoration that affected me like no other. The look from a dead mother to her daughter that said, 'Well-done,' and 'I'm still here with you,' and 'Beautiful,' all at the same time. My mind crawled with envy at the sight, the power within the gray that somehow offered healing and peace where there ought to be none.

Was that my reason for running? Did I hide from the realization that my father, the Damogir of Niantia, was an insane, hell-ridden despot? Sharing his soul with a Black Prince of Pestilence, he fathered more children so that he would have something personal to destroy

along with his realm. What would he say when he saw me? Or would he simply try to kill me first?

'Magata,' he would shriek, even as he died on my sword. I was untouchable by my own choice. The Gray Prince would have to return, riding a horse of the Maddest Black. Of that, I was certain.

It was a plan, anyway.

Hart was standing again. "Ara, you have chained us all. Don't you dare to pretend otherwise."

I wouldn't dare, not tonight in this room full of companions, lovers, and friends, but bad blood was another matter. "Hart, the devils would never do that, and neither will I. Yet, I beg you to look away, all of you, and forget me in your hearts when the Devil goes about his business, and I follow him down. The choice is yours, but the plague is mine, wherever it leads."

It took all of my strength to remain seated under that warm light, a chain beneath my bed beckoning softly. The benediction had been offered late, a ghost nodding in agreement from the farthest corner.

Ayla spoke to me through our distant link, "Where were you last night?"

"They caught me. I was on the ship, ready to sail, and they had Hart waiting to subdue me. She stabbed me with *Sorrow*."

If there was one person in this world that had a chance to control me, it was Inquisitor Hart Storm.

"I felt that. It had me worried, but now you look even more like my brother, so thank her for me."

"I'm a quick healer," I replied.

"Sure, but why are you chained to your bed? I hope that isn't one of Raven's kinks."

"You wish, but I'll tell her you said that. The truth is, she isn't able to sleep if they don't lock me down. She had a rough time in the East, and it seems she really did miss me after all."

"I still miss you, too, after all."

"With that blade of yours, I'm always with you, but Rae's still worried that I'll run."

"I know how that is. It's better that she accepts the truth and lets

you go.” Ayla was never going to forgive my better half for what she’d done.

“Have you ever let me go?”

“No.”

“Good. Please don’t, ever.”

The Benediction of Hart Storm had gotten to me, exorcising the Gray Prince.

Ayla had a clear view through our brood link. “Ara, what’s the matter?”

“I found out that the Second Fang of the *Get* was my blood sister.”

Ayla knew what I was thinking, “You didn’t kill her, so get over it.”

“But my glaive took off her head.”

“*Koki-Ten* had taken over by that point in the fight. You weren’t in control. I felt it through our bond.”

“The alpha demon killed its own host?”

“You’d become its new host by then; it had taken full control. The move was well-timed up until a pack of rival *Kjaira* souls piled on and ripped it out of your heart.”

“You saw that?”

“Yes, and I felt it. You can be sure that we all did.”

That explained much, including the chain around my wrist.

“And yet you’re not afraid of me?” I said.

“I’ve seen you worse. I’ve seen you lose your mind and most of your soul, and you still came crawling back.”

“I survived because of you, and yet I left you in Bridgeton.”

“You saved my life too, and I happen to like Bridgeton, but now I’m visiting Tila and Laila in Maidenhall.”

“You told them about the Gray Prince and the ending of the war?”

“Yes, but they’re still watching for stragglers and rogues trying to complete existing contracts.”

“Good,” I said.

“Ben’s been recommissioned as a Major in the King’s Realm Guard; the Army is moving north to better garrison the northern cities. Are you planning on starting another war?”

“Yes, maybe.”

“Oh. Can I come along?” Ayla already knew the answer to that, but

she had to ask.

“Let me see how it goes first. We’re sailing up the coast to the Nantine city of Kelton. Some of the Nantines call it ‘Sanctuary,’ but we’re not sure if the city still survives.”

“It’s that bad? I guess that explains why King Falbrenn is moving the Realm Guard north. They rode bears the size of Pokka as they left Maidenhall.”

Pokka was a huge rock bear, an old, twisted pet from her former home.

“Ayla, I might not be able to check in once we land in Niantia. The plague can destroy the minds of those that see it, and I don’t want to hurt you through our link. Vigil Stone killed his wife because of it. That’s why I’ve got his daughter with me.”

“Jillian Stone is cute. How are you hiding her from Raven?”

“That’s the real reason Rae’s got me chained up.” I laughed and brushed at Ayla’s ear through our souls’ link.

The light touch was all an illusion, but she noticed it and smiled, waving goodbye.

A pounding on the door the following morning granted me parole. Jillian Stone, backed by Walker Grey, didn’t wait for an answer before barging in and unlocking me. Raven cracked one tired eye as I climbed out of bed. I’d done my best during the night to quell her fears and the desires of us both. *Chains were a turn-on. Who knew?*

“I won’t go running off,” I assured Rae.

“You have visitors,” said Jillian. “Out in the gateyard.”

“Why are you up this early?”

“It’s our turn to keep watch,” said Grey.

“We’re inside the Duke’s Hold. Why would we—never mind,” I replied.

Walker Grey nodded toward the bed. “It wasn’t Raven. It was the captain.”

Juno Hartwell didn’t want to miss out on all the fun again.

“Tell Juno we’re leaving tomorrow, together. Now, let me get dressed.”

Captain Bassett of the Duke's Horse Guards met us outside our keep, handing me a bent crossbow bolt. "They showed me this. I figured it belonged to you."

The captain looked relieved at my choice of escort. Jillian Stone went a long way to soften the blow of Walker Grey's hideously scarred face. My last bodyguards, two exceedingly difficult Paladins, were more than Captain Bassett could deal with first thing in the morning.

I pocketed the familiar bolt. "Thank you, Captain."

Waiting in the gateway, Rifter Gaines and his sister Vivian had their own stout pair of bodyguards.

"Is the party over so soon?" I asked.

It had only been a day and a half since I saw them last, at their family's manor house in the lower city. I was supposed to be long gone from Hamport by now.

"I thought that the guard captain was going to rope us to the wall after I showed him the key to the city."

The bolt certainly looked like a key. It had pried open a difficult door for the Gray Prince.

"Quite right, Rift, and please tell me that I didn't propose to Viv at your welcome home celebration. My wife already prefers chains over ropes."

I'd never mentioned my wife or family to the Gray side of my existence, but Rifter Gaines was different. I'd already met his entire family, having promoted his father to undercity boss.

"There was a rumor of an abduction down at the Docks, the night before last. We needed to know that you were alright."

Boss Mino Gaines had watchers everywhere in the Lower Districts of Hamport. That he'd caught wind of things wasn't a surprise, and yet I was touched by the concern on his son's face. We were of a similar age and had hit it off from the moment I removed him from the cage of the Weasel of Stonnberg.

Vivian Gaines, Rift's older sister, had her own clutches and concerns. "To put it more bluntly, our father wants to know what the feth is going on down at the Docks. The Duke's men have been busy pulling from everyone's warehouses and promising to pay us later."

Duke Breen hadn't been heeding my earlier advice.

"How much?" I asked.

"Two full barges and supplies for several other ships."

"Viv, how much does the Duke owe for the raided stocks?"

"How am I supposed to know that?" she said. "Can't you see that I'm just another pretty face?"

She was far more than that, but I played along. "Let me see your right hand."

I examined her hand and fingers, noting the thick tan line of a missing ring. I removed a leather purse from my satchel and placed it on her palm. "A payment for the goods and a dowry for your father."

"You think that we can be bought?" said Viv.

"I think that the Lower Districts will contribute to the defense of Hamport when the time comes, and that they'll do so knowing that the Gray Prince is overly fond of its leading families."

"You'll be gone?" said Rift.

"Tomorrow with the tide."

This seemed to catch both siblings off guard.

"When will you be back?"

"I'm already back. Can't you tell? Please tell your father to squeeze Lord Chase for all that he owes, but don't let him make too big of a fuss."

"And what do we do with the rest?" Rift knew that the leather purse contained more than five hundred finely cut gems from the Boss of Stonnberg. He also knew that I had three more like it. Each held a king's ransom but wasn't enough to free one wayward Vigil.

"Keep it," I said, releasing Vivian's hand. "Consider it a dowry of sorts, or an inheritance, if things don't work out as planned."

Chapter 5

Far Harbor

We rowed in at midnight expecting the worst, and we met it before we ever left the dock.

Keying off the wharfside lighthouse, our six ships anchored a few hundred yards offshore, looking like black smudges in the shadowy bay. A pair of Hamport Customs schooners prowled somewhere farther out to sea. The docks, empty and untended, seemed to match the city cloaked in darkness above it. A lamp at the top of our ship's main mast flashed a beacon for our skiff's return and a silent hello to any Nantines that might still be paying attention.

Rescinding the order for Hart and Sevin to remain in Hamport, we'd assigned two Paladins to take charge of the fifty sentinel-adepts. My recent bodyguards, Paladins Acker Lorde and Sealy Lankes, had been tagged to protect Captain Hartwell, and the pair had suddenly sprouted manners.

Feth that. I preferred their far more surly selves.

My bodyguard and adopted sister, Yseria Warric, was a lithe, platinum blonde dark elf with a blackblade and the personality to match. She watched my back while Raven watched her and everything else. Andarion Ylamil, Rae's ever-present cousin, guarded us all. The night-vision of the dark elves was almost equal to mine, and being such a small yet capable group, we planned to move fast as we scouted through the city and worked our way up toward the Duke's Hold.

The landing order had been set the week before as we departed Colivar. Our small group would disembark first and connect with the

local powers that be, dark or light. The ships would wait offshore for our signal before delivering the elite scouts and Paladins. Sentinels would come ashore later with Captain Hartwell. Hart would remain on board her ship until the city was deemed completely clear and safe. Horses would come ashore last and only when we needed to move inland.

It was a simple, logical order. The only irrational problem was Careck. I didn't dare leave the demon behind.

My brother was possessed by a *Kjaira* and fixated on Rae, even in his better moments. It made useful conversations difficult, if not completely disgusting. Whenever his inner demon asserted full control, it would lash out physically, trying to break free of its chains, and I beat it back down, both physically and forcibly through the First Fang's soul-imbued dagger. The last *Get of the Damogir* was a weapon of pure terror and domination. Having lost the ability to control those with its reach, the beast had become even more insane, and it challenged us at every turn.

I clung to the fact that our long-term goals aligned. Careck had said that it wanted to return to Qreyl and find an end to the Infernal contract. By remaining unchained, I could get the job done, but only if the beast cooperated. The death-demon and its host were forced to act in the interests of the misguided Damogir. The Infernal contract was backed by the presence of Lord Kasaval, the Low Prince of Pestilence. The Black Prince had usurped the chaotic intentions of the Nantine ruler and sought to bolster its new domain. Without the same confused limitations, I had chosen a path to end the Damogir, the contract, and the Black entity that had ruined the Nantine Realm. Reaching Qreyl was the common goal, but getting both Careck and me there in one piece would be a challenge.

The half-moon and partly cloudy skies were enough for us to perceive the rough shapes and sizes ahead as our rowers pushed through the chilly waters of Sanctuary Bay. With the aid of the light tower at the eastern end of the stone wharves, we chose our landing spot. The tower had been lit at midnight and guided our flotilla to its anchorage. It was thirty feet tall, made of smooth stone, and covered in ants the size of horses. Perhaps, the demons were drawn to the

warmth of the tower's lamp fire or the souls hiding within it.

Not wanting the chained man to walk behind us, I decided to let Careck act as bait. We shackled his remaining wrist and ankles together, allowing him to shuffle slowly to wherever I pointed. With the heavy manacles, he wouldn't be able to flee, not easily, and the clanking noise he made would attract the attention of any Hellions hidden nearby. I'd marked him with my blood and coaxed Careck's demon soul back to sleep in an attempt to keep him in line.

Halting our small boat only yards from the dock, I scanned outward across the city and found it far from dead, buried perhaps, but not dead. A wide scattering of demons roamed among the houses and streets, several dozen beasts, but not a large cohesive Horde. Alphas were absent. The city also offered a plentiful selection of human prey, packed together and cowering throughout, feeding the demons with their fear and despair. The hunger on both sides was palpable, one physical and one diabolical.

The Duke's Hold was a mile north of us at the city's highest point. The lord's local residence was another worn beacon, housing many and being circled by a score or more of eager dark hunters.

"Shall I call them?" Careck nodded towards the harbor's light tower and its demonic hangers-on.

We'd disembarked, and the small boat had pulled back, sitting fifty yards away across the water.

"Can you?" I said.

"Yes, but don't expect me to fight them."

I was OK with that. "Do it."

The sound Careck made was anything but OK. His hideous call echoed around us, a flapping, screeching roar that ran up the lanes from the wharves and into the city as if it were alive, further stoking fear in the humans still present. The beast had been caged up for weeks. It had decided to spread its ravenous wings across the entire city of Kelton and take a bite of the result.

I tried to soften my reaction. The flat of my blade slammed the fiend in the temple and knocked him flat. My next move was to drag him across the pier, intending to drop him in the icy water.

Yser grabbed me and pointed. "He called them as you asked."

The demon-faced ants were on their way; the eight-legged beasts were slow but strong. I perceived several other predators as they raced down toward our position. All of the fiends in the city had heard the unreal call and were approaching, even the ones that I'd first noticed hunting around the Duke's Hold.

"How many?" said Rae.

"Dozens, a somewhat scattered menagerie is heading our way," I replied.

Rae seemed hesitant, "Should we recall the boat?"

We'd fought scattered hordes before, and Rae knew what they could do. The fact that the demons were suddenly focused on a single spot didn't change a thing in my mind when it came to the expected outcome.

"Yseria, watch Careck. If he tries anything, be yourself."

We were still standing on the long stone pier, a permanent finger into the bay that offered a narrow path between us and the shore. With the length of our weapons, only two of us would be needed to protect our front. *Perfect.*

A *Kjaira* had summoned its lesser demonkind, and a pair of death-demon enforcers would be awaiting their arrival. The black diamond of my ring flickered like a candle as *Madd-Jak* peered out into the night, waiting for the demons to arrive. I drew my glaive and the dagger of Second Fang in anticipation.

"Andy, watch for anything that manages to jump us. Rae, stand a half step back, off my right shoulder, and let them come to you. I will anchor the left side and let you know when to push forward."

The simple orders were all that I had time to share, but they were enough.

Rae grabbed my wrist and planted a kiss hard on my mouth. She added one more order for me, two words spoken through the chill night breeze, "Don't leave."

That was anything but simple.

Where Rae harbored a death-demon, wrapped around her heart, I hosted the soul of a demonic warlord in exile. In any battle with the Infernal, I collected Black energy, consuming it and converting it to my use. Some of it, I converted into fury, a battle rage that

augmented my speed, power, and resolve. I had no choice in the matter. Faced with a large enough foe, I would capture too much dark energy at once, sending me over the edge and leaving my darker alter ego in control. With Careck's Black soul already sitting on the dock of the bay, unleashing a second would be a disaster.

To counter my unwanted loss of control, a permanent soul bond existed between Raven and me as an anchor of sorts. Created by a dark elf relic, it tied us both together and sealed us to the Ylamil bloodline in Bastian. With a chaotic wave of demons howling and screeching toward us, the deeply magical marriage would be tested.

I screamed, "Play!" as the first demon, a wolf-man, bounded over the slower ants and met *Exile* head-on.

"Well done, brother." Careck was awake, having witnessed the last of the demon's barrage. He'd enjoyed the wash of Black as it rained over me and seen the effects it had on my state of mind.

Feth him.

I had sheathed my weapons, *Exile* and *Koki-Ten*, while the dark elves still held their exotic blackblades, unsure of whom to watch.

"Put it away," I said to Rae.

Her blackblade, *Talon*, wavered between us.

Careck's eager face had already pissed me off, but the fact that Rae considered me as much a danger as my Hell-bent brother was ruining an otherwise promising start to our trip.

Pools of black blood and slowly melting bodies covered the pier. Covered with rough scales, smooth carapaces, or prickly dark hair, every demon we'd killed had a face, something recognizably human amid the twisted mix of fangs, claws, and tentacles. The images they left certainly had their effects on us all, and an unkind pall lingered in a cloud around us, slowly losing its suffocating force.

The city, still dark and quiet above us, felt different, its population easing into sleep without the trapping and prodding of endless nightmares. Their unconscious relief was palpable. I clung to it for a moment, ignoring the immediate scene while I let my rage subside.

I yelled out to our skiff captain, sending them back for the Paladins and sentinel-scouts, and stepped around the piles of

corpses on my way to wash off the alien blood that stained me head to toe. The icy waters of Sanctuary Bay slapped me fully awake as I doused myself and complained loudly at the shock.

"It's not that bad. Give it a few minutes, and you won't feel a thing." A new voice had arrived, a man in a loose-fitting uniform standing at the foot of the wharf. He shivered in his damp attire, even as he lied. He felt plenty, with shock and fear being his loudest emotions.

"You're from the lighthouse?"

He nodded, "Who or what are you?"

I pegged him as an officer for his insight and shivered, fighting the cold and the Black that still clung to my mind. "My name is Ara Storm. We've come up the coast from Colivar. We'd heard about trouble north of the Everest Range. Captain, is it?"

"Captain Colum Jenkins. Duke Asketil's Guard."

"You were guarding the lighthouse and decided to take a swim?"

"Actually, it was the other way around, swimming first, that is. Seemed like the night for it." He pointed out into the Bay and the lone beacon that still flashed from the main mast.

"Any chance we could warm up in there while we wait for our reinforcements to land?"

"The harbor tower's only a bit better than standing out here, but we can burn the last of its wood. Those your friends?"

"More than friends," I said. "Family."

"You don't travel lightly."

I glanced back at the harbor, the mass of hideous bodies and the dark elves watching Careck in chains. "No, not anymore."

Chapter 6

Beacons

The first boat brought in Jillian Stone, Walker Grey, and my old bodyguards, Acker Lorde and Seely Lankes. Juno wouldn't need them until he landed with the company's sentinels, and the pair would be more than eager to keep me in line. Four more skiffs dropped off ten scouts and eight more paladins. They were smart enough to pick a clean pier.

Using Lorde and Lankes to corner me in the round tower, Jillian searched my eyes. I was watching Raven, who was watching Jill. The silent three-way conversation went on for a minute before I finally reached out and took each of their hands. Neither flinched from my cold grasp. It was a good sign.

Jill smiled first and began recounting our time together in Hamport. It was a simple, familiar trail to follow, and the compelling vibration of her voice offered yet another beacon to guide me home.

Raven waited, allowing Inquisitor Stone to continue her intimate work. Rae kept her free hand far away from her sword and dagger, but her eyes sparred with mine. I wasn't entirely present, and only Jill could declare me so or not. Jill seemed to understand the need to work around and beneath my Beloved, not letting Rae get in the way of her efforts to coax my soul out of its burrow. Rae had her own storms and worries to overcome, but she'd seen worse. We'd left it shackled outside.

From the corner of my eye, I noted Captain Jenkins and his aide watching the scene and comparing opinions on which one of us was truly in charge. They swapped their nervousness and relief through

small comments and nods, drawing their own beleaguered souls back to the surface. We had plenty in common with the city of Kelton and its many survivors.

“How many?” Mott Duncan had arrived with the scouts.

“Fifty-five,” said Rae. “Andy and I killed another twenty.”

“Don’t ask,” I interjected, knowing Mott’s next question.

I was propped up against an inner wall of Gold and Gray as my inquisitor slowly guided me clear of the Black. If I were Raven, I would be pissed too, but *Sorrow* was one of the daggers present in its sheath across my back, right above *Koki-Ten*, and I hoped it would remain there throughout our stay in Kelton.

“Where do we go next?” said Mott.

“Mott, there’s only one way to go. Please meet Captain Jenkins and sort out the order of march. We’ll be heading uphill to the duke’s hold once Raven thanks Jillian and gives me a kiss.”

Mott smiled and nodded, ducking away from Raven’s sullen stare. “I take it that Lorde and Lankes are on duty as your bodyguards. Yseria and Andy are still watching the prisoner.”

It was nice to pretend, but they’d all seen the wharf. The Paladins were simply there to babysit Vigil Storm as the warm glow of friendship and sanity returned to his eyes.

“Perfect, Mott. You’ll be in charge of the wharves until we get back. Ask Scout-Sergeant Keegan to roam and assess the city’s defenses and let Juno know that the city is clear, at least for the moment. He can start bringing in the sentinels at dawn but keep the ships offshore until we sort things with the Duke of Kelton.”

Leaving the lighthouse behind, we had one more introduction to make before we trekked upward to the Duke’s Hold. Captain Colum Jenkins was suitably shaken, and his night kept getting colder and colder. He couldn’t see all that well in the predawn gloom, but he knew a deadly predator when he saw it.

“You’ve captured Careck?” His words sounded more like an accusation than anything else.

“Does the Duke of Kelton have cells to hold someone like him?” I hadn’t gotten around to mentioning my connection to the First Fang of the Damogir, but I would have, sooner or later.

Opening his fiery red eyes, Careck coughed, “What my brother is failing to say is that he’s the actual prisoner here. My captor sits on the throne in Qreyl, sleeping away the feast.”

The guard corporal, Leni Jenkins, was the captain’s younger brother and seemed to recover his wits first. He replied, “We can hold him if the Duke allows it.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Colum Jenkins stepped in, “Duke Asketil shows his support of the Damogir through his dealings with the *Get*. His full cooperation has kept this city alive while many others have fallen into ruin.”

Ruin was obviously subjective in the Realm of Niantia. Fallen, overrun, or starved, the end result was the same, and Careck was right. I wouldn’t be leaving Niantia until the realm’s sanity was restored. I’d yet to share that fact with Company Storm, but first, the Duke of Kelton was going to have a surprise visitor or three.

Freed from constant calls of demons, Kelton slumbered, and my Paladin bodyguards were almost unnecessary. Almost. We had a certain presence to maintain and no limits on what I’d do if the Lord of Kelton didn’t see things my way. We’d landed, uninvited, on the docks of his city. It was a polite invasion, but the war had officially begun. With the Infernal plague on the horizon, everything was fair game from this moment onward. I made sure to explain this to Guard Captain Jenkins and received his blanket approval before we began our mile walk up through the quiet city. He seemed like a reasonable sort in his cold but exhausted state.

Dawn was nearing as the captain pounded on the hold’s outer gate and called to the watch. The massive, steel-faced door hosted several deep dents and scratches, and the stone walls were pocked with regular blemishes where its small windows had been packed with stone and mortar. The ground around the high wall was littered with unreal tracks, and as the gate parted slightly to let us in, a gust of stale fear poured out around us. *Welcome to Kelton*, I thought.

Surprising everyone in our little group, a woman waited immediately inside the gate, lighting up the small yard with her lamp. Being pale-skinned and blonde, she looked like a ghost in the minimal light. Her presence seemed to rattle Captain Jenkins, and he

looked at his feet rather than meet her gaze.

After the rough night, Corporal Jenkins seemed amused by the scene, and I couldn't help noticing the cynical snap in his words, "Lady Miraa, what brings you down from your tall tower?"

Yes, there was definitely a personal connection there between the brothers and the woman.

Our clothes were mostly dry, but they were far from clean, smelling of rot and unknown substances, and our strange faces did little to offset the unsettling hiss of Careck at the back of our little group. All in all, we were a fun bunch.

Lady Miraa replied, "Jenks, I see that you and your brother have survived. Please give him my regards for a job well done. And perhaps he can introduce our visitors."

Colum Jenkin's night hadn't remained entirely frozen after all. A mix of anger, exhaustion, and relief stirred the woman at the sight of the two. The captain's cheeks reddened as she spoke. The brothers had been missed, like dawn's light at the end of a horrible dream.

Jenks nudged his brother, "That's your cue. Wake up."

"Lady Miraa Asketil, daughter to the Lord of Kelton, please meet—err, my apologies, but I'm unsure about titles."

Raven stepped forward with her courtly manners, "I am Princess Raven Ylamil of Bastian, and this is my husband, Vigil Ara Storm of Colivar. He has urgent business to discuss with the duke concerning the fate of your city."

My city.

"And the others?" said Lady Miraa.

"Family, bodyguards, and brother," I replied.

"And the demons?"

It took me a second to understand her reference. "Gone, all of them, for the moment at least."

"Gone?"

"Gone to pieces, but I'm led to believe there are more beyond the city's walls."

"Yes. I will rouse my father. He has been heavily drained by this ordeal, as have we all."

Not all. The city was half-full at best.

I could sense the scoff rising in Colum Jenkins and moved to cut it off. "Captain, please show us some reliable accommodation for my brother. He's in dire need of rest."

"You brought *her* here? Put a dagger in my eye, no make it two, just to be sure."

Duke Dermot Asketil might have only been cranky due to hunger and lack of sleep, but that would have been a kind assumption and one I couldn't make. The fact that he'd taken an immediate dislike to Raven had surprised us all. Even Miraa Asketil seemed confused at her father's ire.

"What's your quarrel with the line of King Ylamil?" I said. "Like you, the dark elves fight to survive the folly and aggression of the Damogir."

"Certainly, but I didn't cause it, did I? She did. She destroyed our Realm." The Duke continued to glare at Raven. He would have growled if his mouth hadn't been full of breakfast, one that came from our travel packs.

"Raven is here to help fight the demons and save her city-state from the Damogir's wrath."

"Ignorant. That's what you are. You speak of the Damogir's wrath as if it's a ship that can be turned. I've seen his rage and the reason for it." The Duke paused in his tirade, taking another bite. "Have you seen a map of Niantia lately? We're a realm with more ruins than cities."

I'd seen Careck and the parchment of his soul. "Lord Asketil, that's why we're here. We destroyed Kelton's host of demons last night."

"Daughter, have the fishermen been notified?"

Miraa nodded, "Boats were launched at dawn."

"And the loggers?"

"Lord Asketil, we can provide an escort if they must leave the city," I offered. "Can you repair its walls?"

"For what? You don't plan on staying, do you?" he replied.

"Why not?"

"Lords of Bastian and Colivar have no standing in Niantia by decree of the Damogir. Your presence here will only bring us to ruin

once a *Get of the Damogir* finds out what you've done."

The man was frail, old, and determined. He'd kept his city alive when many others had fallen, holding his seat and not daring to look beyond his walls at the good he could offer. It was a wonder anyone called this place 'Sanctuary,' but it had survived.

"On the contrary, Duke, a *Get* already knows that we're here, and it was complicit in our actions. The First Fang is locked in your dungeon below," I drew Careck's dagger. "Which eye would you like to go first?"

Asketil stopped chewing, waiting for the smile that never arrived. "There are others," he finally said.

I drew *Koki-Ten*, the Second Fang, "You mean like this one? Or those?"

Rae and Yser each drew their Claw daggers.

"And the last two?" The Duke was feeling sick. Perhaps, he'd overeaten.

"Held by other members of my family."

"You control the *Get*?"

"I can barely control myself. The other *Get* are dead, with only my brother, Careck, remaining in chains."

Asketil seemed cemented in place. "You're a *Get of the Dam*?"

"Lord Asketil, I'm not nor will I ever be a *Get of the Damogir*. I'm here to reclaim Niantia from the unbending wrath of my father."

"So, you're claiming to be a prince? That won't protect you. Your blood is cursed, and you will pay for it with your life, one way or the other."

"I'm not claiming anything. Open your eyes." It was all that I could do to hold back my fury at the man's eager acceptance of Niantia's status quo.

Duke Asketil looked from Raven to me, saying, "My eyes predict doom for you and your wife. I've seen it all before."

He seemed to linger in a pall of deep sadness, having already let go of the possibility of redemption. Perhaps we could wake him up in other ways.

"Captain Jenkins, please allow Andarion to escort the prisoner up here for breakfast."

Lady Miraa seemed uncertain yet nodded her approval. The captain had glanced at her, not her father, for permission, offering yet another puzzle to consider. The attractive woman was around thirty years old yet didn't wear a wedding band. Surely, the Duke's stubbornness couldn't be all for her.

"Duke, who is your heir? I mean, besides Lady Miraa?"

"Certainly not you, so don't get any ideas." He dodged the question like a spear past one's head.

It was Lady Miraa's turn to feel grief as she waited for Colum Jenkins to return.

Was she barren? Was that it?

"Lord Asketil, how pleasant to see you," the hiss of my brother's words made everyone freeze for a moment. "And your daughter is as beautiful as ever."

"Careck, when did you last meet the Duke of Kelton and his daughter?" I said.

"It's been more than a year since I've been this far west. Still, with a call to ascension coming soon, it is a perfect time to reconnect. Many are owed to the Damogir in that regard."

"Many what?"

"Candidates for ascension. Offspring. It is a debt for Kelton to pay if they value their continued existence. I'd hate to have to summon the Horde."

I'd brought Careck up to intimidate Duke Asketil, not expecting to be intimidated by the stone coldness of his words. At least it also had some effect on the duke and even more on Lady Miraa. Both were ashen and unable to reply. Lord Asketil, being one to toe the Damogir's coarse line, had stepped to the side somewhere along the way.

"Andy, please remove him. We've all heard enough." Careck's one-man show was an easy act for me to follow. I reached into my travel pack. "The *Get* has certainly opened my eyes. Which of these are yours?"

I removed a folded sheaf of paper with the first names and ages of a few dozen Nantine children and began to read them aloud. By the end, three had plucked strong emotions in the room, ten-year-old

twins, a boy and a girl named Dolan and Jinn, and a four-year-old boy named Colum. They were all refugees in Hamport living under my sponsorship and going to school. The list had been Lady Breen's idea, a chance to bring some hope back to Kelton. It worked far better than a dagger in the eye.

The morning had certainly warmed for Captain Jenkins. Even his brother was boiling a bit at the list. No one spoke, so I began act two by raising the curtain on their minds.

"Duke Asketil, you sold your grandchildren to a Colivarian Gray House to be used as servants until they were old enough to be used in *other* ways. That was your plan, and yet you scoff at mine."

Not being allowed to barter with a Colivarian delegation, Asketil had settled for the unsanctioned. "The children were given a chance to survive, and the food that it brought us helped get us through the winter."

"And when Careck finds out that they're gone, what will he do then? How many will he rape or kill? How long before the Horde arrives in full to bring your city back into the fold?"

"But we have Careck locked up below, and he's the last." Asketil was finally catching on.

"Careck is my brother and hopefully the key to ending the Damogir's wrath for good."

"You have a plan?"

"Careck does. What I have is a list." I waved the parchment. "You asked if I control the *Get*. Only the Damogir does, to some extent, but what I happen to control is the fate of every name on this list."

Asketil looked at his daughter, who nodded once. *Truth*. Lady Miraa hadn't been immune from the Damogir's touch, and I found myself frowning at what I'd left behind in Hamport.

The duke put his fork down, "Lord Storm, how do we know that you will free us from this endless terror? How do we know that you won't become another Hell-filled despot?"

Perhaps I'd been overselling it, but women are always keener when it comes to leveraging the connections of children.

Raven slid the paper from my fingers and handed the list to Miraa Asketil. "My husband grew up as an orphan. Through great risk and

expense, he has claimed every child on this list. He rescued them from the Gray and placed them under the care of Lord and Lady Chase in Hamport. They each have beds and are well-fed. A new school is being built to house and teach them. Ara hopes that they will one day return to Niantia after the plague and the Horde are ended."

Miraa was speechless, taking a half-step toward Captain Jenkins. It was as far as she could go. The man seemed to nod with his understanding and relief.

"Then why all the mean-looking bodyguards?" said Asketil, suddenly more at ease and enjoying his full stomach.

"I like them that way. Makes my wife look nicer by comparison," I replied.

"Who's she?" Asketil pointed at Jillian.

"She makes sure that I won't end up as a Hell-filled despot."

"Makes sense. What do you need from us?"

"Your loyalty and the will to defend Kelton. The people of Niantia need a place of sanctuary."

"Captain Jenkins tells me that the pair of you killed all of our resident demons last night. Can you destroy the Damogir's Horde?"

"That depends on its size," I said, watching Asketil's frown grow. "But I can turn it away, if necessary."

The Hordes were driven by Hell-knights, entities open to persuasion once they saw you as an Infernal warlord.

"What? You're some sort of Black sorcerer, now? A moment ago, you were a prince."

The Damogir's presence still stood, tottering in the duke's dining hall. I leaned into it once more from another direction.

"Duke, we have two coastal barges full of food and other essential supplies anchored down in the harbor."

Asketil smiled, "Prince Storm of Niantia, why didn't you say that in the first place?"

Chapter 7

Night Shift

A Colivarian schooner continued to patrol the bay. The second one had left, sailing south to Hamport with news of our successful landing and Kelton's ongoing survival. Some of the dispatches it carried would be sent onward to Stonnberg for Duke Ragir, Berykholt for Vigil Snow, and even to Maidenhall for the King. We'd left out any mention of my claim to the Nantine coastal city or my plans for the ruined realm. With our landing, a war had been officially declared, allowing the Colivarian dukes to act without recourse to any threats or openings that existed on their northern border.

Another war, one between our world and the Infernal Domain, had been fought for centuries. The Infernal contract's existence in Niantia had planted a checkered flag on our continent and drove the eternal conflict to a new level, one beyond anything that Colivar and the Order of the Vigil had seen before. The Gold had ceded their place to the Black, opening a dangerous door to my potential standing as a prince of Niantia.

We'd hunted down more rogue demons in the mountains and forests around Kelton, allowing woodcutters to harvest heat and stonecutters to gather material to repair and bolster the outer curtain wall. The demons had breached the barrier by tunneling beneath it, the slow, powerful ant-demons having proved their worth. With the coast, the bay, and the bedrock of the mountains defending three sides of the city, we only had to bolster its thick, north-facing wall and reinforce its main gate. It was a start.

Throughout the ensuing week of planning the defenses, feeding

the city, and building a rapport with House Asketil, the duke and his daughter, Careck fought hard for his freedom. It was as if an outside source had found him, calling him back into line for the Damogir and his realm. The Damogir had brokered the Infernal contract, a Pestilent curse written upon his realm, body and soul. As such, a *Kjaira* death-demon was used to enforce it, acting as a diabolical tool of terror, death, and despair. The dungeons of Asketil weren't deep enough to bury Careck's Black existence, and my only choice was to play its game.

"Where is your lovely wife? Why can't she sleep down here with me instead of you?" Careck was easily distracted by my better half.

Not having seen Raven in a week, it was getting to him, to it, the beast, my brother. With as much as we had in common, we'd never comprehend each other's thoughts.

During our violently effective landing, I'd consumed a potent quantity of the Black. For most, this Infernal energy would bleed off over time, but for me, it clung tenaciously to my soul, and on our second night in the city, I went against my inquisitor's best wisdom. I decided to test the Black power in the controlled environment of Asketil's dungeon. Normally, I'd have *Sorrow*, a *Kjaira* blade that hungered for corruption, consume it, but the chance to experiment was too good to pass up, and besides, Careck was asking for it.

"What does Raven have to do with anything?" I offered a long-running question, one short on thoughtful answers.

"She would have been mine after the Damogir had finished with her. Does she like it rough?" Careck was chained to the wall, sitting on a cot opposite mine.

I judged his words by the color of his eyes. Rarely gray anymore, they glowed deep red in the almost nonexistent light of the dank cell. Raven wouldn't set foot within a hundred miles of the Emperor of Niantia. That was perfectly clear to me, if not to her.

"I know you're only pretending for him, mimicking my brother. What's it like to be chained to something even darker than yourself?" I said.

"Ask your wife. She'll know."

"You're still pretending. You may be right, but we both know that

you haven't a clue to my real power or its source."

"You're magata, that I can see. You're pretending as well, thinking you know the mind of Second Fang. The brood sisters you carry may keep her at bay, but she will strike at you again when you least expect it."

One brood sister, a devious night-stalker named *Sorrow*, slept in its fang, the blood-stained blade of one of my daggers. Another dagger on my back, Second Fang, was imbued with an unbound shard of the *Kjaira* soul named *Koki-Ten*. It was a soulmate of Careck's, yet different from the hybrid soul imbued within First Fang.

Kjaira were death-demons bred for millennia to assassinate dark lords and generals during the endless conflicts in the Infernal Domain. Each brood of six *Kjaira* had an alpha as well as enforcers and night-stalkers, each with different strengths and personalities. My ring held the soul of an enforcer, *Madd-Jak*, a decidedly violent and powerful force without a strong mind to wield it. We made a good team.

At the ascension of the Damogir's offspring in Niantia, the victors of the Blood Challenge would become chained to the soul shards of the alpha demon, *Koki-Ten*. Each shard was held within a fang or a claw relic of the once incarnate death-demon. Each chaining was a permanent weave of souls in a demon-dominant relationship that seemed to culminate in an entity that was part real, part unreal, and entirely insane. My life was a constant struggle against the Mad Black, and the similarities weren't lost on me.

Careck must have been born a rough piece of work to begin with, and he'd taken the most dominant shard, that of First Fang. Our half-sister, Bengla, also born of the seed of the Damogir, held the vaunted shard of Second Fang until she met me. She'd been a calmer, more pensive person, perhaps stronger in keeping her demon at bay, but she'd died by my sword, as did another of her Claw-wielding brothers. At the same time, Company Storm had finished off three more Claws in the unlikely battle.

It had been the first battle of the present war, and it had reshaped everything in my life. As victor, I'd survived enough to claim Second Fang and *Koki-Ten* as a companion. During the fight, it had attacked

me in an attempt to claim a new host, chaining me, heart and soul, but it had been driven out by the souls of rival *Kjaira*, leaving my heart scarred and the connections to my extended family frayed at best. If you wanted to understand the manacle on my wrist and the steel chain holding me to the wall, that would be one explanation.

For Careck and I, it was common ground on a different field of battle. Demons, especially crafty *Kjaira*, were never your friend, but they could be used even as they tried to use those around them. That was the gist of my current conversation, and while the beast's assessment of "magata" was accurate—my heart remained unchained and barren—there was plenty that Careck the demon couldn't see, or wouldn't, about the fate of *Koki-Ten*.

"Have you ever faced a *Greol-hjag*?" I asked.

Greol-hjag were a type of demon that channeled vast amounts of the Black directly into my world from the Infernal Domain. Physically horrific, part hag, part scorpion, about the size of a horse, they were defenseless except for their deluge of dark energy that could smother the mind and soul of any threat. Thankfully, they were rare, and even more so now that I'd killed three.

Careck seemed to consider the wisdom in answering, "Like most demons, we are defenseless when it comes to a Black Fountain's attack."

For reasons unseen, I was a collector, a mover, and a twister of dark energy. The innate abilities gave me a far-sighted perception and a super-empathic ability that made me Vigil Storm. *Koki-Ten* called me a sorcerer, a rare entity among the broods. I didn't create the Black that cursed me but drew it naturally into my being and could change it into something useful for a House of War. As such, I could survive even the Black Fountains of Hell. The sleeve of my sword was made from one exotic hag-demon's hide to prove it.

An ancient witch once told me that, like weapons, some spells were curses, some were blessings, and each a choice in how we used them. We'd been a lot alike until she'd lost her head; the final choice had been an easy one for the *Kjaira* that severed her neck. I'd come to understand many of the witch's cryptic remarks, but the one she'd made about her frozen heart terrified me. It struck far too close to

home.

I shuddered at the recollection, pushing it away in a burst of stored fury. Nothing about that succubus witch had been anything but a curse, and I didn't want Raven anywhere near me when the time came to face the source of the Infernal plague in Qreyl. I would depend on her father, the King of Bastian, to make that happen.

Careck's eyes were a dull gray as he leaned back against the cell's rough stone wall. "What the feth was that? What did you do to the demon?"

"It felt that?"

Normally, Careck would only see and hear what the *Kjaira* decided to share. "We both felt it. Everything went dark for a moment, and when my vision cleared, its presence and control were gone."

"It's not gone but hiding for the moment," I replied. The dark predator had found its own burrow but would return soon enough. "We're leaving tomorrow, heading to Bastian on our way to see the Damogir. Now, go to sleep."

Amazingly, Careck did, without another word.

I spent the rest of the night hoping in vain that my heart would share again what it felt before the soul of an assassin severed its strings. At last, I understood the insanity of Vigaila Grace, the succubus witch, and the emptiness she had harbored. Once set aside or caged, some things would never come back as they were, but perhaps they could be reborn. With our half-broken hearts, we were a proper offering to the god-emperor of Qreyl.

"Stop it," Careck barked at me. "We get it. We won't mess with you again." He was wide awake, scrambling for anger and smelling of fear. A psychic whimper signaled the presence of First Fang as it cowered beneath the surface.

Without noticing, I'd been hammering Careck with stored fury for most of the night, knocking out the beast again and again. It was a beating well deserved, but not one that I'd intended. Not yet, but we'd get there eventually.

"Sorry," I said and rolled toward my wall. I reached out for my aunt through our soul-bond, opening the link fully in both directions. Suddenly, I was sitting in a small kitchen in the Lower

Districts of Maidenhall, the realm's capital.

"What's wrong?" Laila's surprise came through immediately. She was tired but awake. Neither one of us seemed to sleep much anymore.

"I've met my brother. He isn't like your Ben. Not at all."

I was afraid to mention that Careck and I were achingly similar, but Laila could feel everything, and I almost smiled at how it shook her up. Nothing ever startled Laila Storm.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for what we did," she said. *"We shouldn't have pushed you away."*

Laila and I had an unbreakable partnership, regardless of distance.

"I left. It wasn't your fault." I'd been wounded and unable to stomach the fear that they wore around me. *"How did you cope when Ben left?"*

"I couldn't cope. I took another step down the wrong path, and you know how that ended."

It had ended with visions of a plague painted across my mind and a new sister, an unflappable woman in almost every regard. Today, Laila lived a life of personal control.

"Ayla," I voiced in my head. That's all I could say on the matter.

"She's returned to Bridgeton. She misses you."

"Save her," I said. *"Save her, and I promise that I'll return."* It was the first promise I'd ever made, the first that I ever truly meant, and yet I had no idea how to make good on it. With the plague to contend with, I'd set my little sister aside in a shameful act of neglect. I needed out of this crushing cell of remorse and hoped that Laila held the key.

"Ara, you've never really left her behind. I can see that. How is Raven?"

"We're going to see her father in Bastian. It will be a memorable homecoming."

"Why are you chained to the wall?"

"It allows Raven to sleep. I'm swimming in the Black here. Even with two inquisitors watching me, I've never felt so on edge."

Laila pushed a sense of calm and strength back through our link. *"Ara, remember Mayor Waxman and what you did to him? Remember*

what you did to me? Not everyone will survive the coming storm, and it has nothing to do with whether or not they deserve it. Set aside your worries and do what needs to be done. We'll be waiting for your return."

With that, the link closed from Laila's side. I didn't know that she could do that, but Mayor Waxman had been even more surprised as I'd severed his existence in a lair beneath Maidenhall. He'd been keeping a *Greol-hjag* as a pet at the time, and I'd done what needed to be done.

Chapter 8

The Gifts

The horses were brought ashore and corralled outside the Duke's Hold under a strict guard. For a half-starved city, it was a temptation to take the whole herd to dinner. The two barges remained under guard at the Docks; food and lamp oil were being distributed by Captain Jenkins and his emaciated ducal detail. We packed up enough supplies to reach our next destination, a week's ride to the east, and saddled up most of Company Storm's mounts. We'd be leaving Scout-Sergeant Keegan here with a detachment of sentinels to keep the area around Kelton clear of any Hellions that might wander in. The city's chance for survival had arrived, and there was no going back.

According to Careck, the nearest Horde was somewhere to the northeast and several hundred strong. Nothing we had could stop it, certainly not the walls of Kelton. On the other hand, Bastian's walls were stronger and taller and might make a suitable anvil. The passes up through the Everest were only beginning to thaw, and Order of the Vigil reinforcements from Colivar wouldn't be available until the middle of spring to provide any sort of hammer or support.

In the meantime, we'd strive to keep the Horde diverted from any remaining Nantine cities. Two days out from Kelton, riding northeast up the coastal road, we found out what it would mean if we didn't. The port city of Gull had the sea on one side and almost perfect walls forming an arc on the other. In the face of the Horde, almost perfect was exactly the same as having none, and the city had ceased to exist years before we arrived.

Of a similar size to Kelton and suitable for tens of thousands of residents, the vacant lanes, empty except for the bones, the rats, and the wild dogs, angled gently down to the shore and a broad set of long-fingered piers that ran far out into a shallow bay.

More than a few of our sentinels vomited as we rode silently through the town. The pervasive imprint of blood called out a dirge, a clashing of fear and rage. We all felt it, and I found Careck humming along under his breath.

“Did you call the Horde?” I needed to know and vent.

“I did,” Careck replied. “It was my job to punish those that denied the Emperor’s will. Gull was once a pleasant city, more gentle than most in its slope and the blend of its citizens, but its Lord-Mayor had other ideas when it came to handing over his sons and daughters.”

“Sons?”

“Conscripts for the Emperor’s Armies. In recent years, the Damogir has sought to expand Niantia’s borders,” he said. “You can only destroy with an army of demons. To conquer, one must offer the enemy a chance to survive.”

“Like he offered Gull-by-the-Sea?”

Careck stated my reason for being here in words far clearer than the day, “Once claimed, a vassal is never allowed to break free. Their path is decided by the Damogir.”

“How many cities have reached the end of their path in Niantia?”

“Dozens large and small. Some survivors flee into the surrounding spaces, roaming the land and staying out of the Horde’s reach. It’s a harsh life for many, and they dwindle outside the walls of any sanctuary.”

“No one returns to these ruins to rebuild?”

“Never. Would you live your life within such a curse?” There was absolutely nothing ironic about the remark, coming from a death-demon.

We’d encountered attacks on towns before but had always thwarted them before the city could fall. Walker Grey, Captain Hartwell, and my few original sentinels had recently fought such a defense in Lockrun, and I felt guilty for not honoring them more, beyond what the King of Colivar had shown.

With Grey, I was always even, having saved the man's life and having given him the hellsword *Ber'yl*. Captain Hartwell had been promoted beyond all convention by Vigil Moon to Storm Company Captain after Lockrun's valiant defense. She'd had her reasons, and they were good enough for me. I'd also given Juno *Kol'rigan*, a longsword imbued with the soul of an Infernal general.

As for the rest, my two sentinel-scouts, Mott and Cilli, and my original handful of sentinels, I'd only ever offered handshakes, bonuses, and a broken appearance. I halted our small column in an overgrown square not far from our exit gate.

"Mott Duncan, forgive me for what I'm about to do, but it's time to break a curse."

I dismounted and asked everyone to do the same. Careck was right. There was a curse on the land and a blood curse of thousands around us.

I offered a formality long overdue, "In the eyes of the Order and Company Storm, you are now Scout-Sergeant Mott Duncan. In matters of violence, you are now my third, after Captain Hartwell."

I reached into my travel pack and pulled out a black insignia, a half-moon of the Order's elite faction of Scouts. "Cillian the Redd, please step forward."

Cillian Redd's temper was a lot like his axe, fast and wicked sharp. Some would have bet on Cilli's demise long before today due to his eagerness to rush in first and consider the consequences later. He'd been dubbed 'Cillian the Redd' by Paladin Cynan Black for his work saving Lockrun, and it had stuck.

I pinned on the half-moon to Cilli's gray tabard, right next to the Storm emblem, which was based on the elite scouts' original design. Raven had simply added a silver lightning bolt to cross the black half-moon. "Scout Redd, this pin was given to me by Scout-Sergeant Corbin in Berykholt when I joined their ranks. Thank you for your service in the battle for Lockrun, and don't let go of your axe."

A small eruption of cheers rang out from the scouts in our midst, echoing off the dead houses and walls around us. They greeted another one of their own.

Reaching out around me, I pulled on the residual fear and pain

that coated everyone and everything like so much dust, and I began gathering it up, feeding it into a dense ball of fury.

“Sevin Martell, having vanquished the final Hell-knight in Lockrun, you are now a Paladin-in-training. You will train one hour every day with Walker Grey to hone each other’s skills.”

The seven Paladins present all cheered at the news as I shook Sevin’s hand. The exclusive Brotherhood was the cornerstone of another elite faction within the Order.

At the same time, I read the combined imprint of the thousands of souls that signed each drop of blood spilled throughout the city. Years of coastal rain had washed the place clean, but the ruin was still tagged with the subtle power of the individuals that had died there. I wrapped their hearts’ signatures around the growing ball of fury like a ball of twine, gray thread over black.

“Keil Martell, Gunner Trew, and Brandon Hicks, please step forward as defenders of Lockrun, my hometown, and that of Vigil Moon. You, along with Sevin, are now part of the Storm House Guard.”

Most of Company Storm were newly conscripted from the Company of Vigil Stone in Westlake. They were all well-trained, yet they’d been sorely underused before I got a hold of them.

“Keil Martell, as we approach Bastian, my sister Yseria will need someone to watch her back. She’s joined the line of Ylamil, which makes her at least a half-princess and surely a magnet for many challenges when we arrive.”

I looked over at Raven to see her reaction. She found it amusing, which was far better than the alternative.

“Brandon Hicks and Gunner Trew, your first posting as Storm House Guards will be to safeguard Jillian Stone and allow her current pair of Paladins to return to duty among their vaunted brothers.”

More cheers from the Paladins erupted to go along with back slaps and handshakes from their Vigil.

Unseen by most around me, the ball of fury grew in weight. I reeled in every bit of the Black residue that I could find across the entire city, traveling in my mind to the ends of the piers and back, calling and binding the dark energy within its spherical construct.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Careck watching with curiosity. He felt the gravity of it all. If applied with enough focus, what I'd collected could easily destroy its demonic soul along with whatever was left of my brother.

Everything went into the pot. Hart and Jillian were exchanging glances as the demonic rage that I'd collected in Kelton poured from my heart into the immense binding of fury. Feeling certain of my effort, I centered all of it around my heart. My soul didn't seem to mind, and I took that as a good sign, but the fact that my heart didn't seem to notice added a final chill to my day. The Duke of Kelton had called me a Black sorcerer, and we'd soon see if he was right.

Satisfied with my efforts, I offered a consecration to the people, place, and time in which we stood and a blessing for those that would never return to Gull-on-the-Sea, "No one would dare live within this cursed city, but a curse carried here by a Pestilent horde has lived long enough among the remains of Gull's people, feeding off the gray."

There was one last person present at the defense of Lockrun that I'd failed to mention.

"Inquisitor Hart Storm, please come closer. I have a gift for you."

Trusting in my control for once, I drew a fang-dagger from the belts on my back and carved a short, shallow track into my cheek beneath my left eye. As the blade tasted my blood and its alpha soul surged into my being, *Koki-Ten* found the great ball of fury waiting at its destination. The straitjacket fit. As traps go, it was one of my best. As tests go, I couldn't complain, but others certainly would.

My first attempt at trapping a *Kjaira* had almost killed me, but I'd learned plenty since that night. First, *Kjaira* were never your friend. Being entities without a heart of their own, they would never change. Second, they were instinctively driven to find their openings and take them whenever they saw them. For this reason, Careck always remained shackled and chained, even with my ability to dominate him. Third, never experiment with the Black without complete control. Anything else smacked of desperation and would lead to one's demise.

In the instant that the blade cut my face, *Koki-Ten* made its move,

diving into an orb of dense black fury, one surrounded by a powerful gray net. The demon found itself snared, bound, and thrown back into its blade wearing an unbreakable set of chains. As an element of War, Fury was my domain, and I had gained complete control over the alpha demon's movement, abilities, and existence. I could obliterate the beast's soul with a single, focused thought and only had to trade a small amount of blood to do it—a *small trade for a far more significant outcome*.

The abandoned city square was dead silent at the seemingly innocuous act of self-mutilation. For most of my House and me, it was a picnic. For Raven Ylamil, it was drastically more.

"Rae, please put away your sword," I said.

No one had seen her move, but I'd felt her *Kjaira* jump and spin through the hyper-awareness of *Koki-Ten*. One of the demon's extraordinary powers was a certain spatial awareness of threats, something that came in handy for an assassin or a sorcerer.

The fang-blade of *Koki-Ten* was locked hard against Raven's blackblade, *Talon*, only inches from my neck. For the second time in a month, my Beloved had attacked me without any visible provocation, and for once, I wasn't even mad. Bewildered, perhaps, but not mad. Taking advantage of my wife's stunned confusion, Yseria took *Talon* away and shouldered it opposite her own.

"Walker Grey, give your manacle key to Yseria, and no, Yser, you don't get to go next." I untied the scarf from my wrist and gently wrapped it around Raven's. I removed my trusty steel chain and carefully clamped the manacle onto her wrist. The other end was already connected to Careck's rig. "And Keil, before you make a crack, please remember that Raven is my wife and that you'll do better in Bastian with all of your teeth."

Keil showed us all his pearly whites, "As you say, Vigil."

"And my gift?" said Hart. She hadn't forgotten my offer but had given me the time I needed to settle down.

Our column had left the consecrated city of Gull-by-the-Sea following a long-abandoned trader track due east. We'd camped in tents on a rolling, dormant grassland with the snowy Everest far in

the distance to the south. Having found plenty of wood to burn in Gull, we'd carried some warmth with us.

"Oh, that. Have you seen my new fang-blade? It's called *Koki-Ten*?"

Hart was more than familiar with the blade and the lasting damage it had caused my heart only months before, but things had changed, and it didn't hurt for her to look again.

Hart's eyes went wide with surprise, "Does Rae know?"

"How could she?" I said.

"I mean, why haven't you told her?"

Another small trade.

I gave Hart my most pleading look, "Please keep it our little secret, for now."

"Ara, this doesn't seem like a gift at all."

"You're right. How are you feeling these days?"

"Much better. Can't you tell?"

I could tell but liked to hear it from her lips.

"Do you remember your mother?" I asked. "Mine abandoned me thirteen years ago when I was seven, and for the life of me, I can't remember her face."

"Mine died of the winter plague when I was three. I wish I could remember her so I could talk to her at night when I can't sleep." Hart was far ahead of me when it came to sane living and what it took to do so.

"Give me your hand, but don't look yet," I said.

My adopted sister, Hart Storm, was blind from birth, but she saw things that others could not with her gifts of perception. She could see the energy that moved around me and hear it whisper in her mind.

For once, she didn't hesitate, and I took a second to rub the chill from her fingers. It didn't take that long to find her mother lingering behind her, always there, a gray phantom hiding from Hart's sight, but not mine. A slight tug on the thread between them was all it took, and I offered Hart a special mirror.

"Look now," I said, "And just listen to what she says."

Chapter 9

Homecoming

“She thinks you’re handsome and that I should stay away.”

After three more days on the trail, riding east and southeast, Hart had learned to hear the whisper of her mother, picking it out from the many murmurs that caressed her inner ear whenever she paid attention.

“Well, don’t take my word for it,” I said. “But let’s not mention this to Sevin.”

If you can’t flirt with your inquisitor at the end of the world, well, you might want to revisit your priorities. Sure, Raven was chained and secure, but I was famous for my attempts to impress my adopted sister, and everyone knew it was my way to ease the tension from the vastly darker views that Hart and I often shared.

We’d camped in the foothills of the Everest Mountains, overlooking a broad river that flowed north into the plains beyond. Across the river was another ruined city, once known as Trespass, according to Careck. A day’s ride north of the City-State of Bastian, the ruins guarded the Realm of Niantia’s southern border at the pass along the river into the Everest Range. Scouts were out looking for hunters and game while I kept one eye on the unfamiliar landscape around us. There were demonic stragglers everywhere in these hills, and I hoped the dark elves had been busy keeping the local fiend population to a minimum.

We’d spied riders in the distance several times during our trek across the western half of Niantia. Usually less than a dozen, the other riders kept their distance before moving away to the north. We

never gave chase. They were survivors, not demons, and we had our own path to follow.

Being a day's ride out of Bastian, we were almost home, and things were about to heat up. Being married to the daughter of King Ylamil in Bastian would do that, and there was a good reason I hadn't been back in almost two years. Dark elves were dangerous, devious beyond measure, and they never came out and told you what they wanted. Either they took it, or they pretended that they wanted something else and took that too.

For once, we might agree on things, but I wasn't going to tell them that. Bringing them their princess-in-chains would certainly get their attention and start the negotiations. Yseria held the key to Raven's freedom and would unlock her manacles once we'd entered Bastian proper. Until then, our order of march remained constant.

Each night, after a session with Hart, I'd curl up beside Rae, sharing a bit of warmth and counting down the days. No longer fighting things, both of our captives offered me the silent treatment, watching with interest at what I'd do next. To say it bothered me would have been an understatement. Raven knew what was coming and played her cards in the most passive-aggressive manner possible. Careck was in a new place, suddenly watching his manners and making me regret what I had planned for him later. We knew it was all an act.

That night before our last leg began, I scouted across the stone bridge into Trespass. The city was smaller than Gull, frontier-sized, and had once hosted an organized, military presence. Now, only the sturdy bridge remained. Someone or something had left no stone unturned, no house unburned, no wall fully standing. Only a persistent pack of wolves had failed to get the message, forcing me to kill two, including the pack's alpha, before they understood mine.

The broad bridge into the town must have been the only one for miles around, and it was well-used by local survivors, scavengers, and the Damogir's Horde. I could smell the recent tracks across the worn-out stones. Fortunately, the paths almost always ran east and west, with few travelers daring to turn south along the river trail into the dark elves' domain.

"What do you know of the Horde?" I thought.

"Which?" said Koki-Ten. The alpha had been in solitary confinement since Gull, and though usually glib, it had also been offering me the silent treatment from within its new cage.

"The nearest," I replied, making a guess.

"The Damogir's Horde. What would you like to know?"

"How many Hell-knights does it have?"

"Five."

The Horde's presence was as large as expected, maybe larger.

"Why haven't they moved against Bastian?"

"There is nothing of desire there, yet."

"And what is it that the Damogir desires?"

"That which he can no longer have."

"You can't be more specific?"

"The specifics do not matter, only the heart. Always the heart."

"And yet, the Damogir destroyed his heart along with his domain."

"Hell is heartless, as are its deals. That you should know better than most."

"Is the city of Qreyl that far gone?"

"It is the domain of two Emperors. For any realm, nothing could be more wrong."

"And it employs an assassin of some repute, one exceedingly skilled in reaching its target. Where will the Horde move next?"

"Wherever Careck commands it."

"How would Careck know where it should go?"

"You mock me," Koki-Ten hissed in my head, "You know that I am bound to the Damogir."

I assumed as much but wanted to know if Koki-Ten would be candid enough to confirm it. I switched topics, *"What happened to Trespass?"*

"The Damogir decided to visit and place an example before the King of Bastian."

"He destroyed his own city to set an example?"

"He collected the people and the Army first, sending them east."

"To do what?"

Another hiss, *"Ask Careck. He's docile enough beneath your power."*

“Aren’t you?” I thought.

Of all the shards of the death-demon’s soul, *Koki-Ten* was the most significant piece, and it was bound to me as much as the Damogir. I hoped that my blood ties to the demon would be strong enough when faced with an opposing view.

The Damogir owned his own shard of *Koki-Ten*, but he doled it out in small pieces to each new *Get* that he elevated. Each new weaving created an entirely new soul, a mix of human and dominant death-demon that was bound to serve the Damogir. *Koki-Ten* was special in that, after the death of the Second Fang, it had returned to an independent state, seemingly free of human souls. It had shown the ability to collect its sister soul shards from the slain Claws of the Damogir, giving it a way to reclaim a majority of its essence.

Koki-Ten remained bound by the Infernal contract to serve the Damogir, but it had also been chained in the crudest of ways by the consumption of my blood’s unique energy and the soul imprint it carried. A Black-addicted boss in Stonnberg had been the trap that snared it. The binding offered protection from the alpha’s urge to own me and had been utterly effective in Gull-by-the-sea when I’d used its dagger to mark my face.

The spark of the *Kjaira* receded in a hiss, its mind disappearing within its cage of Black fury. I didn’t know it could do that, but I appreciated its honesty. I let it be.

The ice water that flowed through Raven Ylamil rivaled that of the Rundil River on our right. Winter was losing its grip as Rae was finding hers. Andy and Yseria rode directly behind us, keeping a close eye on my Beloved. This would be my second time in Bastian, having visited the city two years before in an attempt to sort out the exile of Raven Ylamil and the city-state’s growing demon problem. For some reason, I hadn’t been invited back.

King Janis Ylamil was old by elven standards and looking to fortify his bloodline before passing on the throne. His brother Khamros, the Counselor to the King, would be key in naming the successor. Khamros was several decades younger than his brother and acted as the High Shaman of Bastian. Besides uncle Khamros, Raven also had

an older brother, two older sisters, and several cousins in the Ylamil bloodline.

Andarion was a cousin, and Yseria Ylamil-Storm nee Warric was a newly adopted member due to the decree of House Storm. I anticipated plenty of discussion over Yseria's standing, but that wasn't the only thing on my mind as we entered the dark elves' domain. The long valley hosted a lake at the northern end and a smooth-walled city in the distance. Rugged foothills and the Everest Mountains collared the valley, offering a defensible and secluded city-state.

I'd gained a certain standing among the family of Ylamil. My marriage to Raven and the use of an ancient elven artifact had sealed our places in the bloodline. Although there was probably more discussion in store as to whether or not my elven standing was a curse or a blessing, I preferred to see it as a way to get what I wanted and get out before anyone was the wiser.

I needed to understand why the Damogir of Niantia would be interested in Raven and why he would go to such lengths to control her. Five of the six *Get of the Dam* had ceased to exist in an attempt to kill her last year, soon after Rae had visited Bastian. How had the Nantines found out her location? How had they tracked her south into Colivar? I wasn't leaving Bastian until I knew the reason and was sure that Raven would be safe enough among her family.

We'd cleared the lake and were halfway up the valley when eight dark elves on foot welcomed us by blocking our path. They carried blackblades across their backs and long-bladed spears in hand. I hadn't been expecting flowers.

"Hello, Lorna," I called out as they approached.

"Why is my sister chained?" Lorna Ylamil, Rae's older sister, was as dangerous and devoted as they come. Her warmth, or lack thereof, was renowned throughout the elven community.

"She hasn't complained about it, so why should you?" I replied.

"Prince Ylamil-Storm, I see you're ready for your visit. It would be a shame for it to end before you ever got a chance to meet with my father."

I was an Ylamil prince but also the son of a different king. My

standing, magically enhanced or not, still had its limits. Lorna, for her part, had always been forthright in her concern for Raven.

“Yseria, please unlock Rae but hold on to her sword.”

That simple act seemed to make all the difference to Lorna. “Welcome to Bastian, brother. I see you’ve taken the longer path to get here. How is Niantia?”

“In ruin, for the most part. Haven’t you scouted downriver?”

Lorna’s brow darkened as if I’d rechained her sister. “We have peered through their door but could go no further due to the pall that abides there. Are they still a threat?”

“The Horde is roaming about. So far, it seems to be ignoring Bastian, but I believe that may change soon.”

“What did you do?” said Raven. She’d remained silent during the day’s ride south through the Rundil pass. She carried her own suspicions about my passive-aggressive abilities.

“Besides declaring war on Niantia? I brought you home.”

Lorna scanned our group. “And who is your other prisoner?”

“You don’t recognize him?” I said.

It was the question of the day. Which sister would get it right?

“He looks a bit like you. Why would I know him?”

“He belongs to the Damogir.”

“Careck?” Lorna flicked her weapon, and the seven guardsmen at her back spread out around us.

I punched out behind me with my mind, pushing a dose of home-spun Black at my half-brother. He closed his eyes and toppled from his horse. The chain did a nice number on his shoulder, and we all heard the pop.

“See, he’s harmless. Leave him alone.”

“He won’t last a day within our walls,” said Lorna.

“Is that a warning or a threat?”

“It’s a promise.”

OK, I might have underestimated the dark elves’ animosity, but it was well-placed.

“Lorna, give me one day, and he’ll be gone for good.”

“And what do I get in return?”

“Your sister, but that is up to your father and uncle Khamros to

confirm.”

King Janus Ylamil offered us his warmest welcome, “What is Yseria Warric doing in here?”

King Ylamil had gotten word of his daughter’s iron-bound arrival and glared at me in objection. After two centuries of existence, he had favored Raven with the dominant place in his heart, and his fondness for her had almost destroyed his entire line, not to mention the City of Bastian.

The impromptu meeting was for family only, that of Ylamil, not Storm, but I wasn’t having any of it.

“She is my sister, and by decree, an Ylamil, if only by half,” I replied.

“She isn’t a blood relative,” said Khamros, a man in step with his older brother.

“And neither am I,” I retorted. “The relic didn’t alter my blood. It merely changed everyone’s perception of it.”

“It did far more than that to both of you,” said the King. “But I will allow Warric’s presence if you give me a sufficient explanation regarding the imprisonment of my daughter.”

The truth I offered would be as clear as day to the King, “Raven and her father are far too much alike. She would destroy the world to save the one she loves.”

“And you would destroy yourself to save the world.” Raven had finally found her voice in front of her family.

“Rae’s had some issues in terms of self-control. She almost killed me twice in the past month,” I replied. “What is the penalty for murdering a member of the Royal line?”

“Death or exile depending on who did the act,” said King Ylamil. “But you’re still breathing.”

“Minor details. For the safety of us all, I ask that you hold Raven here until I come back.”

“Why?”

“One, she won’t survive where I’m going. Two, the Horde is still out there hunting for her. And three, no one here is handing my wife to the Damogir, especially not me.”

The last was as much an accusation as it was the crux of my planned escape. Only one person could decide Raven's fate, and he was more than a little put out by my tirade.

Lorna ignored the deeper meaning and chuckled, "Rae, you've never mentioned how romantic Ara has become."

I couldn't look at Raven. Time was running too short, and our parting was about to be blessed by the King.

"Prince Storm and I are of a similar bent when it comes to romance, it seems. I did everything I could to keep her mother from that blackened bastard in Qreyl."

Feth. It had always been about blood and a battle between Kings.

The time for manners was over.

"Why did the Damogir want Raven's mother?" Asking the obvious, I reached out around the room with my empathic senses.

As warm as Janis Ylamil felt at his recollection, his brother Khamros was filled with an ice-cold rage. Lorna, the protector of Bastian, crossed her arms and frowned in frustration.

Khamros, the Royal Councilor, wanted none of it, then or now, but filled us in on the affair, "Raven's mother was human. Janus had taken her as his consort against the wishes of his line and sired Raven. Tiasa's humanity aside, it wasn't that big a problem except for one key fact. The Damogir of Niantia was married to the woman. She'd suffered enough of her husband's dark dealings and fled, running into exile with a Black soul wrapped around her heart."

"The *Kjaira* soul that Raven inherited protects her to this day," King Ylamil sounded proud, almost beaming at the memory of his consort and completely forgetting the consequences.

The insanity of the Damogir, his Infernal contract, and his need to bed any and all women in Niantia might all be traced back to his former Queen and the rage he must have felt after she spurned him for Ylamil. Suddenly, it all made sense to me, and the stone walls of Bastian didn't seem tall enough.

"The Queen of Niantia?" was all that I could spit out at that moment.

"Look at Raven and tell me that she isn't the daughter of a queen." A doting father's words pointed my way to the door.

“King Ylamil, I ask that you keep Raven here, safe and sound, while I deal with the Damogir. I’ve brought my company to help defend your city.”

“Defend it from what?” said Khamros.

“The Horde that is going to turn this way once I tell them where Raven is hiding.”

Some of my ideas are frowned upon. This one took things to a whole new level, but my bloodline connection was permanent, and my planned maneuver was the epitome of dark elf deviousness. I waited for the applause but got something else entirely.

King Ylamil witnessed my ascension in the eyes of those that knew how these things worked, “Prince Storm, why would you do that?”

Two steps away, I could feel Raven’s pride sneak past her anger. Dark elves were known for their back-stabbing schemes.

I didn’t let him off the hook, “King Ylamil, why wouldn’t you? Or would you rather send Raven into exile again, hoping that the *Get of the Damogir* tracks her down before the Damogir loses complete control and unleashes his wrath on the entire continent?”

I doubted that King Ylamil had known the long-term consequences of taking the exiled Queen of Niantia as his consort. His lack of response said as much.

I continued, “Why should entire cities be destroyed while yours still stands? Why should countless numbers of Nantine women be raped while yours remain safe within these mountains? The people of Niantia are desperate to survive. They’re fighting for a way out, and yet you’ve done nothing. And don’t tell me it isn’t your problem because from where I stand, you were the one that sent the Damogir over the edge by bedding his wife.”

I knew how I would feel if someone had seduced Raven, how I felt when I mistakenly thought she was siding with Careck against me. There was little that was sane about me in those crushing moments.

I turned to Rae, almost pleading, “Please stay here and guard these walls against the Horde when it arrives. It’s large but not impossible. I’ll try to keep it occupied until the southern passes are open. Warden Hartwell and Vigil Snow should be able to organize a

counterattack while Bastian holds the Horde's attention."

Raven didn't object, but I would have welcomed it merely so that I could hear her voice one more time.

I had one final issue to address with the Ylamil court, and it was personal, "After Raven visited last fall, someone here sent word to the *Get of the Damogir* of her expected location."

I looked at the King and Khamros and Lorna. Each seethed at the accusation, but only one of them could have done it. Raven seemed confused, unable to comprehend the thought of being so betrayed by her family, a daughter discarded as a pawn, but it wouldn't be the first time.

Well, feth them, I thought.

Taking their silence as my answer, I strode from the room in search of Careck and my horse.

Chapter 10

Homecoming

Two could play my game, maybe three or four. I'd lost count of the reasons why I was sharing another prison cell with Careck, waiting for one party to figure my way out first. At least the room was furnished, and they hadn't chained us to the wall. I still had my weapons, but the door was reinforced with steel and only unlocked from the outside. There was a tiny window for fresh air and two comfortable-looking beds. With Careck in the room, I wouldn't be sleeping.

My former brother was enjoying the view. "A prince of Bastian gets the nicest cells."

"Perks," I replied. "The King and I have similar tastes. He said it himself."

"Don't remind me."

I'd remind the death-demon at every chance until we got out of the city and far, far away from my double princess better half.

I was a different kind of prince, the kind that woke each day to face the insanity of the Emperors, the Kings, and their cursed offspring. My seeming addiction to the Mad Black wasn't a coincidence after all. It was in my blood, as much as Raven carried a Black soul left by her mother and reacted instead of thinking sometimes. *Kjaira* were like that, and I must admit, so was I.

"Go to sleep," I said.

Careck was feeling frisky. "Why don't you make me? It took four of your companions to subdue me the first time. Why don't you show me what you've got, little brother?"

I checked out the hunger in Careck's intent. There, hidden right below the surface, lurked the alpha demon, playing dead. I'd fought and beaten its brood, and it had to know that. The results of that battle were evident in the gray color of my hair and the life still missing from my eyes.

Careck wanted *Koki-Ten*, or maybe it was the other way around, or maybe the demon was only bored. I drew the matching pair of fang-daggers and tossed one across the room into his eager grip. A glimmer of respect rose to the surface in his smile.

"Bring it, brother," I hissed.

He did. The dagger's feel seemed to bolster his strength, and the shackles he wore snapped in two as he leaped like a shadow cat into a snare.

I blocked his first and only attack with my right vambrace and punched out twice with dagger strikes to his defenseless ear and right shoulder, bleeding his confidence and reversing his momentum. As he moved his blade back to defend, I turned mine outward, piercing his forearm. The hit weakened Careck's grip on the dagger, *Koki-Ten*, allowing me to wrench the dagger from his hand as I kicked his knee sideways.

Careck, the demon, didn't like feeding on its host and shrieked in our heads in complaint until I rammed a burst of fury into First Fang's hilt, knocking both the *Kjaira* and the disarmed fiend unconscious. I wasn't one to stab a man while he was down, so I kicked Careck a few times in places he'd remember whenever he woke up.

"Good fight. I feel better," I said to no one listening. I sheathed both fang-daggers and waited impatiently by the door.

A few hours and a short knock later, the door opened with my sister Yseria standing outside. Yser's platinum blonde curls played her dusky complexion and lithe form to perfection. She'd been my bodyguard from the moment we'd met within these very walls, and while I'd been hoping to see someone else, Yseria's love and loyalty were a gift I'd never take for granted.

"Please remove Careck's useless manacles and help me tie him to his horse."

Keil, Gunner, and Hicks walked into the room and carried my half-brother out. They didn't say a word.

"What happened to Careck and his chains?" Yser pointed to my large travel pack out in the hall.

"It wanted to play."

"Is that something that brothers do?"

"No. We're not brothers. Blood means nothing to me anymore."

"When did you decide that?"

"When I found out that I was the blood son of an Emperor and that my father enslaved his entire line for a chance to get revenge on his wife."

Yseria didn't know how to respond to that remark, so I changed the subject.

"Yseria Storm, you are no longer my bodyguard. As Captain of the Storm House Guard, you will defend our extended family from the coming Horde."

It took her by surprise, but she nodded and offered a short explanation, "They've appointed Andarion as Captain of the Bastian Guard. They aren't taking any chances with the Horde. You really spooked them."

And so, they'd locked me up. What was Ylamil thinking?

"How long until the passes south open?"

"Two, maybe three weeks," Yser replied.

"Tell Juno to send Mott and Cilli through as soon as possible. They can guide Vigil Snow's Company and catch the Horde on Bastian's walls."

"You make it sound easy."

"If I were a demon, I wouldn't want to be within a hundred miles of Raven Ylamil-Storm after she finds out that I'm gone. Tell her that I love her and that I forgive her for not unlocking my door."

Yser grabbed my arm. "I always liked having a younger brother, you know. I was never the last of my line with you around."

I kissed Yseria goodbye, stealing a kinder memory for the road, and handed her a leather purse, another quarter of my gem cache. "Just in case," I added.

I knew Yser had the spine to do what needed to be done. She'd

watch out for Raven. There was still a chance that Janis Ylamil or Khamros would sell Raven out, and I hoped my family didn't stick around longer than necessary.

We'd been riding for three days heading northwest, tracking the Horde. With its massive size and tepid speed, it wasn't too difficult. I figured we'd catch sight of it in the next day, two at the most. Hordes were slow, and larger ones were even slower. A pair of riders could scout around it with ease once it was sighted, especially during the day when the demons were relatively sluggish. At night, their senses and physical prowess would grow, making them a far more dangerous group.

Careck had lost his tongue yet again. My queries about who tipped off the *Get* to Raven's location went unheeded. He was still sore and sat gingerly in his saddle, to say the least. It was a sign that the demon was trying to stay out of my sight. *Kjaira* were smart that way.

As we tracked the Horde, another group of riders, a dozen strong, seemed to be tracking us. They were hunters, not assassins, a mix of predator and prey, riding less than a mile north of us across the plains.

I pointed into the distance. "Should we say hello?"

Careck only grunted, completely agreeing with my idea.

I replied to his grunt, "Know them, do you?"

The ropes that once bound him were gone. I'd been practicing my control, sometimes using the First Fang dagger and sometimes not, taking turns at knocking him out. To make sure he wasn't acting, I'd kicked him a few times in the right spots after he fell off of his horse and scanned his mind for any reaction. Like me, he was a fast healer, and I didn't want him to get too comfortable. I was pretty sure I couldn't break him, but I could try.

As we angled north, Careck seemed less than thrilled, expecting old friends, perhaps.

We were a quarter-mile away from the group when they started to boil in fear and frustration. An argument had broken out. Horses were dancing with unease as people pointed at us and others

pointed away. The shouts weren't pleasant, and, if I had to guess, there was some discussion over who was in charge of the scouting party. Finally, one rider spun and broke away from the others, trotting steadily towards us.

Careck almost had a twin, and I felt unkind for the stray thought. The young woman that approached was missing her left arm from the elbow down, and thankfully, that's where her resemblance to Careck ended. Still, she knew him. That was certain as she yanked her horse to a stop thirty yards away. I could sense the newfound terror in her heart and the way she fought the need to run.

"Stay," I said, drawing First Fang.

The woman began to back up, and realizing the threat, the rest of the riders were pounding in our direction.

"Runa! Back away!" The other leader of the group took charge of the situation, placing his mount between ours and the girl. He had a weak beard and barely enough air for command.

"She was like that when we found her," I said.

"What?" said the man.

"The girl. Runa. She was missing her arm when she got here. We had nothing to do with it."

I only wanted to talk, to calm things down. How could I have known that I picked the wrong topic?

"Like feth you didn't. I watched Careck cut it off when she was twelve."

Feth.

I didn't dare ask the man why. The reason was irrelevant, and my self-control was waning.

"Sure, but were you there when he lost his?" I pointed to my right, not looking away from the riders. They knew the *Get* well enough, but they didn't know me.

More dancing of horses occurred as the riders noticed Careck's incomplete right arm and lack of weapons. Somehow, that seemed to make them even more nervous.

The girl pushed her mount through the gathering. "I'm Runa Lundin. Who are you?"

The young woman had a shoulder strap on her left arm tied to her

horse's reins, leaving her right arm free to carry a blade or a shield as she rode. She had neither. She might have been sixteen but had the tired eyes of someone twice her age. They were blue, almost gray.

"I'm Ara Storm. I see you know Careck, a man more beast than brother."

"He's your brother?" she asked.

"No, not really, but he seems to follow me wherever I go these days. How big is the Horde?" I pointed into the invisible distance.

"Nine hundred, maybe a thousand. It won't hold still, so we can't count them cleanly."

It didn't matter. Either number was a record in my book. The Nantine Horde was larger than any I'd ever heard of back in Colivar, let alone seen. Some paring down would be necessary before allowing Careck to direct it south toward the Everest and Bastian.

"Where is it going?" I said.

"Wherever we go these days, it follows."

"It's chasing twelve riders?"

"No, it's chasing our city," said Runa.

That was a new one for me, but I played along. I'd never seen a city move before. I'd lived a sheltered life. "You have a city?"

The girl pointed due north. "We're circling Lake Haven, hoping to stay ahead of the Horde. Plenty of rivers and streams feed the lake, and they seem to slow the demons down even further. Maeve says that if all goes well, we'll turn to the east and try to lose it."

I wasn't sure how one could lose the trail of a city on the move and was sure the demons would eventually catch up. *What kind of Hell had happened here?*

Careck toppled over, landing splayed out on the ground beside its horse. My lack of control was shining through.

I sheathed the fang-dagger. "I'm sorry if we scared you."

"What happened to Careck?" said the leading man. He was about my age, perhaps a bit older, and his eyes constantly searched for potential threats.

I watched him carefully consider his next move. "What's your name?"

"Loke Dahlgren. My father leads the clan."

“Maeve is your father?”

“Maeve Lundin thinks she leads the clan, and my father allows her to believe so.”

Runa scoffed at that remark and the politics behind it.

“Careck’s not dead, if you’re concerned,” I said. “But please keep him that way. I need him for where I’m headed.”

“Where’s that?” she said.

“The city of Qreyl. Have you been there?”

After tightly binding and strapping Careck across his saddle, the riders had been kind enough to escort us past the Horde. We spent two days circling it at a safe distance to the east. It was practically on their way home, they said.

As we moved ahead of the unreal interlopers and into the Black Wind that guided it, I could feel the pressure like a door slamming over and over in my face or a thunderstorm that simply wouldn’t quit. A thousand scattered demons were nothing compared to the cohesive, chaotic mass that trudged across the land in steady pursuit of its prey.

Deep in the middle of it all were five Hell-knights, driving the Black Wind and steering the Horde’s direction. The pall had to be smothering whatever was running ahead of it and sapping the energy of the traveling city. The Horde would eventually reel it in as their quarry’s hope faded entirely to despair.

I considered nudging Careck awake to call the Horde in our direction, away from its path to the northwest, but I didn’t want to risk the demon turning it south too soon. Besides, I had other ways to weaken it.

It took another full day of riding to reach the rolling city of Solander, once a provincial capital on the western coast of Niantia. Assembling a vast herd of people, horses, and wagons, they’d run, leaving an unmistakable trail in the landscape behind them. They traveled within striking distance of the forests and a large lake that dominated the central plains, allowing them to harvest the wood and water needed to sustain the ten thousand or so people that still endured. Others fished the lake or hunted or made emergency

repairs on wagons while the rest kept moving north.

The city's ongoing survival was ingenious in a hellish torture sort of way, and I joined in the misery, tasting the wave of Pestilent Black that rolled over us all. Only Careck seemed immune as we waded through the masses that had all stopped for dinner and a chance to rest. Several large cooking fires burned, tents were pitched, and refuse pits were dug. It was as if everyone had a role to play and could do it in their sleep. Most did so.

I was introduced to the head of the clan, Rollo Dahlgren, and his wife, Maeve Lundin. They shared one fire with several other families, including numerous children, but none below the age of five.

"Loke says you're going to Qreyl?" Rollo was a suspicious sort, eager to be rid of the strange pair that had suddenly appeared in his camp. I didn't blame him.

"I'm on my way to return this beast," I nodded at Careck.

Loke was sitting out of arm's reach of everyone and keeping his eye on the familiar evil in their midst. He'd brought us in, and his father wasn't at all happy about it.

Runa sat close to her mother, Maeve, whispering and pointing while her mother studied the scene. A woman of fortyish years, Maeve sat out of Rollo's sight, watching and waiting for her partner to finish his interrogation.

"What happened to Careck's arm?" said Rollo.

"I wish that I could take the credit, but I didn't cut it off."

All of it was true, yet beside the point. I saw Runa nod and whisper something more to her mother.

"You look a lot alike. Are you one of the *Get*?"

I would have asked that one first. "No."

Rollo glanced behind himself at Runa before continuing on. Runa Lundin obviously had some *clear sight* ability. She'd be worth her weight in gold to a Gray House.

"Loke says you were tracking the Horde. Why is that?"

"I'm a collector," I replied. "I've never seen the like nor experienced a pall this thick. I'm impressed by your ability to carry on."

"We're one clan now. One big family. That's how we do it," Maeve

chimed in for once, not allowing her husband to crow. "But we were twice this size two years ago."

Rollo, for his part, waited for Maeve to finish. "Master Storm, where did you come from and why are you here?"

"We rode up from Bastian and from Kelton before that. As Loke said, I'm heading to Qreyl."

Rollo had been asking something entirely different. "You've somehow subdued the First Fang of the Damogir and brought him into the middle of our camp. The other *Get* will track him here, and we will pay dearly for your mistake."

"My mistake?" I inhaled deeply, sucking air into my lungs to offset the pain and the schism of the Mad Black that was beginning to take hold. My Vigil scars had begun to simmer, a fire across my breast and back clamoring for my attention among the rest. "The other *Get* won't have a chance to bother you."

Careck fell onto his side and went to sleep at the sound of my voice.

Rollo stood up and backed away. "Why is that?"

I staggered to my feet and gave Careck his daily kicking, releasing some of my pain and fury. If he lived, he would never sire anything. "Because Careck is the last of the *Get*."

The rest of the local clan had backed away by the time I was done. I could hear children weeping in the background.

"Tie him up securely but keep him alive until I get back." I turned to leave.

"Wait," said Maeve. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk in the wind."

Chapter 11

Gone with the Wind

I had to say, ‘for a walk,’ didn’t I?

Leaving Daur behind with my pride, I walked for a full day and ended up standing in the path of the Horde the following evening. It was an experience that I’d never forget, sort of like standing beneath the world’s largest waterfall on a cold spring day, only worse. The pressure was jarring and immense; the rage was constant in its roar. I felt it all as I swam among it.

On my trek, I didn’t forget about Careck. Using First Fang’s dagger to stay connected, I intended to keep the demon in check until I got back, but it may have slipped my mind as the Horde of a Thousand Demons marched past me. I say ‘marched,’ but being chaotic to its core, the Horde was doing anything but that. The Black Wind drew it in one consistent direction. The rest was up to the fiends to decide if they wanted to brush shoulders with me as they screeched and chattered past.

I didn’t take offense. Instead, fighting the urge to draw *Exile* and begin cleaving my way through the Hellspawn around me, I soaked in the alien sights and sounds and aimed for the Hell-knights that ran the show. To stroll right through a sadistic menagerie takes little talent. You simply have to be one of them or wear their mask well. A day engulfed by the Black Wind had fed me to the point of breaking, and I’d socked away a ton of dark energy, storing the excess around the cage of *Koki-Ten* for safekeeping. The death-demon in my dagger didn’t mind, or it would have said something, I was sure.

I was here for one reason: to steal the Horde. My soulmate was a

warlord of note in the Infernal Domain. Its House dealt with the Infernal Horde and its Hell-knights, moving them around to its advantage amid the constant conflicts of Hell. Being coated in the Black, I saw no reason why I couldn't use my power to do the same. In many ways, a single *Kjaira* was more dangerous than five Hell-knights, and while I was still learning the ropes and chains when it came to *Kjaira*, I'd been dealing with Hell-knights for a while with some success.

Sure, I could collect Careck and force him to do the job, but to rely on the alpha would be a risk beyond reason.

Feth, but I was already here, wasn't I?

I reckoned the only sticking point was the fact that the Infernal contract holder was safely tucked away in Qreyl, leaving nothing in the way of a cord that I could cut for control of the demonic beings. With five knights at my disposal, I only needed one to break ranks. It was up to me to figure out how to make that happen, and my methods were diverse, ranging from an act of violence, a force of will, my soul-mate's Infernal authority, or a twisted bribe. If that fell through, I could always return with Careck.

As statues, the Hell-knights would have looked daunting in any city square. They were seven feet tall, decked out in inky black armor with longswords hanging from their hips. They usually wielded lesser demons as their first line of attack. The knights closely trailed the loose formation as the whole chaotic mass continued its pursuit at a steady pace.

Not one to be ignored, I pushed a hint of Fury into my voice, "Halt and be recognized. Whose contract do you follow?"

The five alpha demons halted but didn't reply. Each dark soul was bolstered by the demons around it and locked into their mission.

I drew *Exile* and issued a challenge, pushing my own cloud of Black into the scene around us, challenging theirs. War collided with Pestilence, Fury battled Despair, and the menagerie around us howled at the feast, halting and turning their attention inward. Being the focus of a thousand demons got my attention, too, and stole away what little patience I had.

"Am I recognized?" I didn't want to say it twice.

One knight stepped forward and drew his weapon. “Yes, *Firefanged*, but you are not the contract holder. We follow the will of the Damogir.”

“That is a lie.” *Exile* flashed through the knight’s neck, dropping him into a pile of smoldering armor. I hadn’t yet met the Damogir, but I had to believe that the complete destruction of his Realm was more than he’d bargained for.

My presence held the attention of the remaining four. Standing at the source of the Black Wind, I had an unlimited supply to use. I drank in the pestilence and dread, spitting out Fury, the fuel of War. It was a simple exchange for a sorcerer of the Black.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“To direct and feed our minions,” said another. He didn’t dare step forward.

I shouted my challenge again, “Another lie!” I darted in and around him, cleaving the alpha to pieces before he could draw his weapon.

The remaining three drew theirs in defiance of the usurper. The chittering of the lesser fiends grew excited, and the nearest began circling our spot, marking out their feast. *Exile* shrieked out its own challenge, keeping them at bay for the moment. The broadsword was in its element, the soul of another warlord imbued within it. The ring on my finger flashed, coaxing me to let it play.

I gave in, stowing *Exile* and drawing *Sorrow*. I disappeared within my dark cloud, taking down two more Hell-knights with simple strikes through their helms. I couldn’t read the knights and had picked random targets for extermination in this negotiation. I couldn’t eliminate them all, or the massive Horde would be unleashed, and I needed it to be guided to its complete destruction. That left the last with a strong bargaining position as we faced off, each waiting for the other to blink.

The final Hell-knight replaced its longsword and waited for my next offer. It had to be better than the last. With only one alpha to coerce, I focused my energy and pushed a burst into it, trying to burn away any threads of Pestilence that remained.

The last knight didn’t seem impressed.

My will pressed down on it, “You will kneel.”

Again nothing. My frustration grew, and the chaotic mass seemed to swell around us, circling in closer and closer.

Feth.

I’d seen too many ruins already, and their source of destruction was bound far beyond the ruin of one stoic knight. I sheathed *Sorrow* and drew *Koki-Ten*, my one connection to the Damogir. Holding the Second Fang, I must have appeared as a *Get of the Dam*. The Hell-knight suddenly acquiesced, dropping to one knee and halting the Horde in its hellish tracks around us.

“What is your name?” I said.

“I have none. The contract holder has taken it as payment for my release.”

I hadn’t fooled the Damogir, and yet he had relented. I didn’t ask how or why. I sheathed the dagger, “You are *Gozan, the Shepherd*. You will serve my House until you are given leave.”

I was *Firefanged*, a similar weapon for the High Prince of Hell. Of that, I had no doubt, and we both had Houses to defend from those that failed to respect the boundaries.

“An honor,” it replied. Hell-knights were a dry bunch, but *Gozan* may have been a desert.

“Take the Horde into the ruins of Trespass. Hold there for a fortnight, then move south and lay siege to the city of Bastian. If you fall, remain in this domain, and you will be honored by my House for your service.”

By destroying four of the five knights, I’d weakened the cohesion and the strength of the Horde. Already, a few demons at the fringes were wandering off in a new direction. A single Hell-knight could direct the Horde but would be the weak link. Once the remaining alpha was defeated, the Horde would become completely unleashed, scattering to pursue easier prey. The good news was that Hell-knights fought from the rear, and *Gozan* would likely be one of the last to fall in the coming battle. In the Order of the Vigil, there was always a trade-off to consider, and I’d trust the clearer minds on our side to decide what to do.

The Damogir could certainly reclaim his Hell-knight and the

Horde, but lacking any available *Get*, he'd have to leave Qreyl to do it. I didn't see that happening with his hold on the plague. To stand within the power of the Horde and feel its chaotic drive was more than intimidating. It was unreal. I could only imagine how the Infernal plague would feel, and I'd never be right.

Having plenty of time to contemplate my next move, I followed the tracks of wagons back to the rolling city, but the curse of the Black had painted me into a mad corner of my mind, and I was slowly losing my grip. By the following dawn, the wagon tracks seemed to run in all directions, and the sun rose on all sides. My shadows danced aimlessly around me, mocking my every step. Having one laughing shadow was bad enough, but ten bordered on bullying. Finally, I drew *Sorrow* and began stabbing at them on the ground. Every time I hit one, it would evaporate, and its howls of laughter would fall silent. I got them all before they got me. Well, maybe. Do shadows bleed?

"It's never that easy, is it?" Vigaila Grace sat on the damp grass across from where I lay. "You can't keep changing your mind without a heart to anchor it."

"Feth off," I spat back, and she disappeared before my eyes. At least this time, she had looked like a crone and not some horny vixen of the King's court. Honesty is always appreciated in the throes of madness.

I was stuck. I could barely stand, and I couldn't walk, except in circles. It wasn't a happy place. Finally, in my stupor, I reached out for Ayla, of all people. She'd know a way out if anyone did.

Ayla sat down wherever she was, her face frozen in a mask of calm, saying, "Just sit right there."

Where had I heard that before?

I followed her suggestion, and before I knew it, I was lying flat, tied in place, and missing my clothes. A fire was burning nearby, its smoke billowing throughout a village. After all of the pain, the scars, and the burning, it had only been a hellish dream. I looked about for the witch, and seeing her approach, I screamed.

"Good morning, brother. How did you sleep?" Careck's smile

never even reached his mouth, but for once, I was glad to see him.

We were both bound and staked in place near the campfire, but only one of us was naked, well, mostly naked. I had plenty of bandages tied around my legs, and the branding scar on my chest was covered with some sort of paste. The cold breeze that caressed my skin felt good.

"I'm not your brother." My voice was wrecked again. I guess the screaming that had kept me awake during the night had been my own.

Feth.

"And where are my clothes?" Trying to whisper didn't help either.

"They took them to the lake to wash out the blood. I told them to take you too, but nobody listens to me anymore."

"And my weapons?"

"In the pack behind you. What did you do to the Horde?"

"I turned it."

"How?"

"Would you like me to show you?" I said.

"No."

"Then go to sleep."

He did.

"Who needs a rooster with you around?" Loke Dahlgren tossed me a bundle of clothes from my travel pack.

I caught it with my face.

"Sorry," he said, cutting my bonds. He was a confident fellow. "Maeve told us to keep you still, keep you from hurting yourself or anyone else. You freaked out when we built up the fire to keep you warm."

"Loke, who's tracking the Horde?"

"No one at the moment. It's moved off to the south. We've camped by Haven Lake and are taking stock of everyone and everything that remains."

"How long was I out?"

"It's been three days, almost four, since you decided to take a walk." He didn't ask.

Cut free, I could barely move. "Please help me get dressed. There

are children around.”

“Don’t worry. They’ve all seen you. Tana wanted to charge a copper for everyone that came by to see the scarred man. What happened to you?”

OK, he did ask.

“Tana?” I said.

“Don’t worry. She’s seven. One of Maeve’s last.”

The news didn’t thrill me.

Loke helped slide a clean shirt over my head. “I’ll get one of the older girls to help you with your pants. They can use the practice.”

Maeve Lundin ducked out of her tent. “Loke, stop torturing our guest. Can’t you see he’s had enough already?”

That was one way of putting it, and a clearly accurate one, but Maeve’s presence wasn’t helping. She realized her mistake and turned around, allowing us to finish with my pants.

“It’s safe,” I said.

“Thanks to you,” said Maeve.

“My tailor made the pants, not me.”

“You have a tailor? Should we be calling you Lord Storm next?”

“Only dukes call me that,” I smiled. “I’ve only stopped by on my way to the Damogir’s court.”

“Of course, you have.”

“Maeve, leave the boy alone and get back in here.” Rollo Dahlgren was awake and not happy about it.

“You can get your own backside up without my help, codger. I’m busy catering to a prince.”

I’d be Emperor before lunch, but some breakfast did sound good.

“Did Careck cause you any trouble?”

“Nothing that the flat of a shovel couldn’t put off until tomorrow,” said Loke.

After years of tormenting the Realm, payback was coming fast for Careck.

Welcome to my world, brother.

“I wish I had one of these,” a new voice, Runa’s, surprised me. She was sitting on my pack, examining my heavy vambrace.

“Runa, what did you see?” I said.

“Everything,” she smiled.

That didn’t thrill me either.

“Any blacksmiths among the clan?” I asked her.

“They’re only good enough for simple tack and straightening a bent blade.”

“Now that Loke has helped me with my pants, do you mind helping me with my armor?”

Runa stuffed the vambrace back into my pack. “Lord Storm, you’re not leaving so soon, are you?”

“Runa, can’t you see he’s had a rough patch. Go easy on the fellow.” Maeve was a hen keeping a close eye on all of her chicks.

Runa smiled, “But he was like that when we found him. It wasn’t my fault.”

I showed her my tongue, and she showed me hers. I would have laughed if it didn’t hurt terribly to do so. I didn’t ask about her arm but found myself looking around for a shovel just in case Careck woke up.

Chapter 12

Severed Limbs

It was three more days before Runa could help me back into my armor. The layers of leather and chain mesh formed a simple suit of war, and it did just enough to make peace with Rollo Dahlgren.

With each passing day, my presence seemed to dig farther beneath the skin of the rolling clan's leader. I was *Master Storm* to him, an outsider that belonged on the road and nothing more. That I'd diverted the Horde made little difference to his attitude, even if his wayward city had found relief and a chance to mend right along with me. Rollo knew that the Horde would come back. The nightmares never ended in Niantia.

Loke and Runa each had an independent streak, ignoring their father's mandate to stay away from the *Get*, for that is what I must be. How else could I have turned the Horde? How else could I heal this quickly from the puncture wounds or survive all the others that still rode on my limbs, chest, and back? After two years of demonic encounters and abuse, I was the Scarred Man. It cost most folks a lot more than a copper to find that out.

Loke was good enough to explain what I hadn't already sorted for myself. "My father doesn't know you well enough to hate you, but you're a reminder of everything that haunts him and Maeve, and I'm sorry, but you scare us all more than Careck ever did."

It was a common symptom of the curse that ruled my life, even afflicting Vigil Moon and making my hold on my adopted family tenuous at times. Just ask Raven or Laila about the need for distance. I wasn't bitter. I promise.

Feth.

“Maeve doesn’t seem to mind me,” I said. “And neither does Runa.”

The girl was a free spirit, dwindling like everyone else from the hard life and the soul-sapping cloud that had chased them across Niantia and into the ground. Runa was searching for something and struggled to keep herself going until she found it. I didn’t dare ask what she was missing, knowing that I would never be able to find it. I’m courageous that way.

I didn’t often interact with the older woman, reading her cool distance as a clear sign, but Maeve was always around when her children were about, keeping watch on a fox in the hen house. Maybe Loke was right about everyone being scared of me, and I suddenly wondered why they’d let me anywhere near them.

Loke explained, “Maeve has a heart big enough for the whole city. She’ll see past the scars to the man underneath.”

“Are you talking about Rollo or me?” I said.

“Ha, probably both, but Maeve trusts Runa, and my step-sister is on your side here.”

“Runa’s not your half-sister?”

“Maeve and my dad have only been together ten years or so. Tana is my half-sister, but Runa was from a different man, one that didn’t live long enough to see her grow up.”

“The plague took him?”

“No. Rumor has it that Maeve killed him when Runa was young. Maeve had gone to visit some relatives and left the girl alone with her husband for a time. When she came back, she put a long knife through his eye while he was sleeping. Everyone assumed the worst had happened.”

With that news, Maeve’s protective gaze made more sense, and I decided to take Rollo’s prodding to heart. With my armor strapped in place and my mind settling, it was time to go.

“Thank them both,” I said. “And tell Runa goodbye for me.”

“You can tell her yourself. The girl will be crushed if you slink away on the day before her birthday.”

“Her birthday? Tomorrow?”

Feth.

Loke smiled. "Runa barely tolerates me as a big brother compared to how she views you. Stay one more day for her, especially in light of where you'll be going next."

"You make a convincing argument. How old will she be?"

"Sixteen. How about you?"

"Take a guess," I said.

"Twenty-five, give or take." Loke was being kind in light of my gray hair.

"I'll be twenty this summer, give or take a few months."

"How is that?"

"I grew up an orphan and lost track of my birthday. My best friend decided we'd use hers as a day for both of us to celebrate."

"No, how is it that you're only nineteen?" Loke seemed completely thrown by the news.

"It doesn't take that long to make a scar," I said.

"But you're going to Qreyl."

"It's about time, isn't it?"

"I guess it is. Another Blood Challenge for the *Get* is long overdue. I'm sorry." Loke didn't expect to see me ever again.

"For what? It's long past time to confront my father, the Damogir."

"Feth, don't say that out loud, or my dad will wreck you. He already suspects that you're a *Get of the Dam*, but to know for sure that you're from the Damogir's bloodline would send a lot of folks here over the edge. You might not make it out alive. Careck only survives because of what you did for us and the fear he instills in everyone."

His remark was a warning, not a threat, but it signaled that it was time for more formal introductions. We caught Rollo and Maeve outside their tent. Tana peered out from between her mother's legs and did her best to make me laugh. Runa sat nearby, stoking their campfire, as Loke broke the good news about my leaving the following morning. It gave them something to chew on before I cut in.

"Thank you both for the care you've given. Being alone on the road, I might not have survived my ordeal."

“You’re leaving tomorrow for Qreyl?” With the good news already in hand, Rollo Dahlgren had suddenly found a concerned tone about my destination.

“It’s time,” I said. “But I wanted to ask about what you and your city will do next. Where will you go?”

Rollo Dahlgren’s only method for protecting his clan was to keep scouting and moving, but that wasn’t sustainable in the long run.

“Where did the Horde go?” he asked.

“The ruins of Trespass.”

“And you know this how?” said Maeve.

“I’m from Colivar, originally. A few weeks ago, I landed in Kelton along with my Vigil company. I have abilities that help me see and slay the demons, and my company is trained to do the same. I’d been given rein to declare war on Niantia until I found out how little of it was left.”

“And where’s your company now?” said Rollo. His concern had quickly faded into skepticism.

“With my family. They’re waiting in Bastian for the Horde to attack, but I left a few in Kelton, helping to keep that corner of the continent clear.”

“You have a family?” said Maeve.

Was it such a shock?

“My wife and adopted sister are of the line of the King of Bastian. They will help defend the city’s walls.”

“You think that the Horde will attack Bastian?”

“In a fortnight,” I said.

Neither of the pair wanted to ask how I knew that, so I changed the subject. “Take your clan southwest to Kelton. It has walls, plenty of empty houses, and it’s about as far from Qreyl as one can get in Niantia.”

Rollo shook his head. “We tried that once. The Duke of Kelton wouldn’t let us in, saying we couldn’t support ourselves and, as you can see, we haven’t really thrived since.”

Runa murmured in the background, “Lord Storm.”

Her parents were having trouble with their present reality without even looking to the future.

“Runa, please bring me my travel pack. I have a birthday present for you.”

The girl brightened. She’d heard the news of my departure and knew that Niantia was a land that borrowed but never gave back.

“A vambrace?” she replied.

“No, not yet. But would you settle for the key to a city?” I dug out a leather pouch full of gems, the largest and last I had, and gave it to Runa. “From your big brother, Prince Ara Storm. Please give the Duke of Kelton my regards.”

“So, you’re a prince, now?” Rollo was almost as done in as Maeve by my offhand pronouncement.

Runa opened the bag and gasped, handing it over to Rollo. I can’t recount Rollo’s exact words, but they would have made any army sergeant proud. Maeve could only stare, speechless.

“I won’t need that where I’m going.” I whispered to Runa, “Happy Birthday.”

Never had a hug felt so good.

“She didn’t deserve it, but rules are rules,” said Careck.

We were two days north of Lake Haven and angling east toward a keep that housed the *Get of the Damogir*. It was the *Get*’s one domain that existed outside the reach of the Emperor.

“Which rule? And did it specify which arm?” I replied.

“I took her left arm. She can still work and ride.”

“You are a prince among the *Get*.” I’d forgotten the shovel.

“If she were a boy, I would have cut off her head.”

“His head.”

“That, but being female, I couldn’t deprive the Emperor of a chance to spread his seed further.”

“The Damogir doesn’t mind if his conquests are maimed?”

It wasn’t really a question, and thankfully, Careck didn’t respond.

“What was the offense?” I said at last.

“Some families discard the Emperor’s offspring before they reach the age for ascension, depriving the Emperor a chance to acquire the strongest of his brood. We respond in kind.”

“Discard is a nice way of putting it.” *As if Runa had discarded her*

arm.

"Thank you," said Careck, but he knew what I meant.

"How did you know?" I should have realized the answer before I asked.

"Those of the Damogir's bloodline are marked by it. None of Maeve's carry the curse."

Of course. Blood was always the bearer of bad news. "And why do you have a separate hold?"

"We gather the candidates there first. Most aren't allowed to enter the Damogir's city without an escort."

"Why not?"

"You want me to spoil the surprise? Never."

"Would it have something to do with the Infernal plague?"

Careck leaned over and spat on the trail. "Do you have anything to do with the fact that I piss blood every morning?"

"He was a prince after all," said Maeve. "Curse his name."

"Why are you so heartsick?" said Rollo. "The *Get* gave us a way to survive, and we'll claim fealty to whatever banner he waves when he returns from Qreyl."

"You know that no one ever returns from there, at least not the same person that went in. He won't even remember us."

"Mae, you went in, and you survived."

"Rollo, that's where you're wrong. The curse destroyed me as much as the next girl. We can only die once."

"Is that why you killed the bastard?"

"Rollo, he wasn't a bastard. His name was Ara, just like that crazy prince but not half as cursed, and he had a spotless heart, like Runa's."

"The stars swing back around every year. Some are bound to look the same as those that came the year before."

"Dolt, I ain't looking at the sky. I'm looking at Runa's missing arm and knowing how it feels."

"Mae, close your eyes and go to sleep."

"Do you think they still have a church in Kelton?"

"Sure. Why?" said Rollo.

“I’m thinking about your funeral arrangements. Now, close your eyes and go to sleep.”

Chapter 13

The Culling

Once an isolated stronghold for the *Get of the Damogir*, our destination had become the permanent base for the Nantine Guard Army, and I was soon to discover the twisted relationship between the two factions that defended Niantia.

Teeming with men, horses, and well-ordered activity, the barracks, fields, and warehouses for an entire army existed outside the sizable, stonewalled hold. Careck's Keep waited within, hosting a restless clutch of residents. Sitting in the heart of the realm, the stronghold overlooked a vast lake to the east and an arid cluster of mountains to the north. A cold, dry wind whistled through the surrounding town, passing between the many houses and whipping the martial cohort into motion. The wheels of Niantia's wagon continued to spin even as the road they traveled ended in a ditch.

"Impressive," I said to Careck. "Do you think that they'll object to my presence?"

"I can think of one that most certainly will."

"Another surprise? How could I have known you were such an entertaining fellow?"

Careck eyed me with disgust. "Likewise. Ignore the barracks and head for the hold's main gate. You're in charge of our little party, and I want to see how you greet the other guests."

Besides the Emperor and the Damogir, the *Get of the Dam* were the highest powers in Niantia. As a ranking member of the Vigil of the Order in Colivar, I had plenty of standing and experience dealing with high-ranking officers and even dukes. It was all about rank,

owning it and not backing down from one's position, and not making an ass of oneself in the process.

"What do they call the hold? It can't be all 'Get' this or that, can it?"

"It was originally called *Queen's Hold*, but that name fell out of favor decades ago, well before my ascension."

The Queen may have tolerated the Damogir's desire of bedding every woman in Qreyl but chose exile before her husband wed an entity that wasn't of this world, an Emperor stand-in from the Infernal Domain.

"The Damogir had saddled the Queen with her own Black soul, and she ran," I said. "His Infernal partner must have shown him how to make the binding stronger so he could fully enslave his offspring."

Careck grunted, neither agreeing or disagreeing. "I prefer the term 'Careck's Hold' to remind the Army of who is in charge."

The name was still wrong. It should have been called 'Keep of the Damned' or 'House of Pestilence' or 'Condolences,' but the fact that the Army needed a reminder might be a good thing. I hoped the introductions would go a long way in settling any discontent.

With one look at Careck, the platoon of guards at the Hold's single gate waved us through. The men tried to hide their fear by looking elsewhere and avoiding our eyes. Careck didn't fight his grin as he rode past.

"Friends of yours?" I said.

"Never," Careck laughed and pointed the way forward, steering us toward a four-story structure, twice as wide as it was tall with a small army of servants and military staff running in and out of it.

"The general's headquarters?"

"No, ours. The Army posts guards and are allowed to visit, but they sleep in their own tents."

Stable hands met us and took our horses around back. Servants carried our packs inside as a tall, middle-aged gentleman approached and bowed.

"Welcome home, Lord Careck. Please advise us on your accommodation needs."

Careck didn't respond, staring blankly ahead and ruining the

man's dependable script. He slowly brushed the dust from what was left of his right arm. Nothing could have scared the gentleman more.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Steward Rask."

"Mister Rask, we'll be sharing a room," I drew *Koki-Ten* and spun the fang in my hand; my bona fides were more than enough to set the man in motion.

With another bow, his face as blank as Careck's, Rask ran back into the keep.

"Nicely done, but don't ruin it for the rest of us. I've got a reputation to maintain with the women inside."

"What women?"

"The Emperor's future cursed. We gather them here along with the Emperor's offspring as they all come of age. The candidates slated for the Blood Challenge are selected, as are those slated for the Emperor's many beds."

I couldn't imagine the selection process. "And what happens to the rest, the one's not selected?"

"Only the strongest are brought before the Emperor, be they Challengers or future bearers of his seed. Of the women, the weakest are given to the Army to bolster their morale, and then they're sent home to bolster the realm's population."

"And of the men?"

"Some few are conscripted into the Army, but most are used in training and destroyed."

"Second Fang was a woman."

"Some women of the bloodline are fierce enough to enter the Blood Challenge, but Bengla was the only one to ever succeed in that rite. I knew it was a mistake."

"How so?" I said.

Bengla's weakness had been an uncursed child, a newborn son, and the fact that I hadn't mentioned it was enough for Careck to infer that it had been born. Still, he couldn't know whether or not it had survived.

"Because of her weakness, I'm sharing a room with you and not your wife."

Having been slain right after she'd abandoned her child, Bengla's failure to capture Raven paled in comparison to her fate. I would do everything in my power to preserve the life of her son, Jarlla. The babe was my nephew, after all, and innocent by most civilized accounts.

"My sister was a stoic yet thoughtful woman before she lost her head. Don't you go losing yours," I back-handed Careck across the nose with my steel vambrace. I doubt he felt any of it.

He staggered for a moment and righted his balance. Harboring the death-demon for so long was taking its toll on the man. Given rein, Careck was a walking, breathing threat for everyone around him, and I only put up with his continued existence because he would guide me into the city of Qreyl. More and more, he was also becoming the ruin of my own sanity as he spurred a confusing, sadistic urge for me to beat him to a pulp. Careck was no longer my brother, and I hated both the man and the demon for that.

Entering the keep, we were immediately shown into a massive dining room. Tables were filled with young men and women, and the room held an overpowering blend of excitement, terror, and dread. Careck seemed to perk up, absorbing the fear-filled energy as our presence stoked it to new heights.

The occupants fell silent at our entrance, and after a moment, a few began to clap, followed by the rest in a less than heartfelt welcome. My mind itched, and my appetite fled at the eerily false sound.

We sat apart from the rest at a large table overlooking the hall. Careck's nose had stopped bleeding, but the stream of blood remained, drying on his mouth and chin, and his missing right arm was perplexing to everyone. Toss in his sour expression and a few weeks of dust from the road, and you had a most unpleasant dinner companion. It certainly drew everyone's attention.

There were dozens of candidates present and decidedly more women than men. I scanned the young men and women seated together or apart, picking out those that found the coming Blood Challenge as a first step on the road to power, those that fought to control their own bladders, and those that dreaded the abuse or the

death that was waiting for them.

“Some have been waiting months for us to arrive and escort them to their fates. Can you imagine how ready they are to be taken?” Careck licked his lips and pointed to a nearby table of women. “You may join us for lunch.”

May, must. His simple words came out smelling like unadulterated filth.

Without a word, six women marched up and took the chairs around us. I was like a fly on the wall, not fully present within the macabre scene. I couldn't do more than watch as their fear and revulsion overwhelmed me. It wasn't only Careck that caused them to tremble where they sat. My mood was readily apparent to all that dared to look.

Careck reached out and stroked the bare arm of one young lady. Straight in from the road, our long trip hadn't been kind to either of us, but Careck had fallen far. His dominant standing as First Fang had been shattered along with his nose and his manhood, but not everyone knew it.

Careck growled at the woman, “What is your name?”

The woman shook, rattling the plate in front of her. “You've already forgotten about my father?”

Careck clamped his hand on the woman's wrist, twisting it backward. “Thule? Your family owes me much, a debt they must fully repay. You shall begin tonight—,” Careck suddenly sagged back in his chair, letting go, smile fading, eyes closed.

My left vambrace moved of its own accord, catching Careck's jaw and throwing him backward onto the floor. The candidates froze, and servants came running. So much for being the fly. A spider ate far better anyway. It was a perfect introduction for the room, and it earned me everyone's complete attention.

“Find Mister Rask. Careck is exhausted from the long trip,” I explained to the confused servants.

I felt hungry and unnerved, ready to be done with the putrid presence of the First Fang. More and more, I understood Rollo Dahlgren's point of view.

This keep had a lower level of accommodations. I could smell it.

When Rask arrived, I directed Careck's body to be secured in a cell below with their heaviest chains. I was done with the beast for the time being. Heeding my final request, Rask locked the doors to the dining hall from the outside and intercepted any visitors to the keep. I would meet with the Army's commanding officers in the morning.

Around the hall, no one ate. No one moved except Miss Thule, who was weeping as she rubbed her sprained wrist. I was fresh out of scarves. Several others at our table continued doing their best not to cry.

As the last door lock was set, I stood up carefully and began, "Careck remains." I drew the dagger, First Fang, and slammed it into the table. "Shackles mean nothing to the weapon. What do they mean to you?"

Blank stares, head shakes, and anxious tears.

"I'm here to discuss your future. Careck has abdicated his position as First Fang, giving me rein to do as I see fit. As such, there will be a culling."

Fear filled in the blank expressions of many around the room, though some seemed to nod in agreement. Miss Thule continued to quake.

I held out my hand to her and waited. It was her decision to make; she could fight the curse or live beneath it. She reached out, choosing the monster over the isolation she felt, and I slid down our connection into her wounded heart. I drew upon the terror and the pain, burning it away like so much chaff. Her eyes were wide yet dry by the time she chose to let go.

My eyes had never left the room and its varied reactions. I was hunting for a curse yet carrying an inner rage at having to face it. What would Jillian Stone say? Likely, it wouldn't matter; the mere sound of her voice would lead me out of the dark.

"I carry Second Fang, but, unlike Careck, I'm not chained to the Damogir's brood. As such, my blade carries the name of the death-demon, *Koki-Ten*." I drew the fang-dagger and planted it beside First Fang. "Each *Kjaira* blade carries a soul shard and an eternal curse. Such is the power of the dark Emperor that seals it."

The Nantines were often known to outsiders as ghosts due to

their pale, almost faded complexions. As I looked about the room, I recognized the unnatural force that drained their color and vitality. I fought the urge to scream.

As the war in my chest finally calmed, I continued, "Does anyone here strive to succeed in the Blood Challenge and ascend to join Careck as a *Get of the Damogir*?"

Several stood, eight to be exact. It was a good number. Ten more men remained seated, and thankfully no women stood among them. Of the eight standing, all were of a single bloodline. My eyes scanned the half-brothers, searching for something other than what I'd experienced every day since leaving Hampton.

With the eight men still standing around the hall, I focused on one far closer. "Miss Thule, please stand and explain to us your family's debt to Careck."

The woman almost fainted at the harsh sound of my voice, but she met my eyes as she rose from her seat. "Careck escorted my father, a colonel in the Nantine Vanguard Army, south into Fugaku, hoping to negotiate the safe migration of our family and others from Niantia."

There were gasps among the many tables, and the eight standing challengers shuffled in place, their eagerness to respond to the young woman's confession taking hold. A year ago, the woman's words would have condemned herself and her entire family. I held a different court.

"The Vanguard Army no longer exists. How did your father survive?" I replied.

"He was badly wounded in the battle, but his men carried him to safety."

I'd seen the battle through the eyes of the Hell-knight that commanded the slaughter. "There was no safety that day, only butchery and the random paths of demons hunting down survivors."

"You were there?" she said.

In a way, I was. "Yes. I ordered the massacre."

My candidness slapped the woman senseless. I needed her to respond, but she didn't.

"What is your name, Miss?"

“Hani.” Her presence grew where there was none a moment before. She had pale brown hair and a complexion to match with eyes of icicle blue. Her clothes were finer than most in the hall, fitting loosely upon her frame.

I suddenly wondered what they were being fed before we’d arrived at the keep.

“Please sit down, Miss Hani Thule. Your suitors stand ready to claim you.” I eyed the eight young men and gauged their lethal intent.

In a room full of hostages, they seemed the closest to volunteers, and their eagerness made the culling’s start achingly easy.

“To elaborate on Miss Thule’s question. I was there, and it was my army that smashed the Nantine column to pieces. The Vanguard Army sought to break out into the lands of Fugaku, using the power of the Dark Emperor to do so. They couldn’t be punished enough for the damage that they caused.”

I’d lost my brother in that conflict.

I pointed to the nearest blood challenger. “Stand before me, tell us your name, and tell us all what that means.”

As the man drew closer, he could see my eyes and the color of my hair, the nicks and dents in my vambraces, and the weapons that I carried, but he couldn’t see the wounds and scars that I wore inside and out.

“My name is Jackal Wise. It means that there are traitors among our realm and that her family must pay for their schemes.” He smelled like Careck and had to be of the Emperor’s seed. I knew in an instant that he’d be formidable as a *Get of the Dam*.

“Jack, you are truly a weapon in the making. Hold out your hand that we may all see what will be chained to the Emperor’s pestilent will.”

As he lifted his hand, I drew *Sorrow* and plunged it into his palm, piercing it fully. He’d never even seen it coming. To everyone’s surprise, a puff of black smoke began to trickle from the wound as *Sorrow* fed on the corruption within him. Jack was my half-brother in more ways than one, a sufferer of the Mad Black.

“The culling has begun. Go sit down and watch it bleed.”

I pointed to the next nearest challenger, repeating the sequence with him, and the next, and the next. Being of the Damogir's seed, they all carried the same curse of corruption and the same curse of thought.

The fifth candidate approached, another of my half-kin. "My name is Pasco Gale." The young man reversed the script, "What does it mean?"

He stood before me, waiting for the answer, demanding it before he would sit back down. He was maybe a year younger than I but taller, another pale Nantine, his hair lighter than most, with a frame as lean and fit as all the other men.

A Saint in the making. The heart of an army.

I reached out my hands, palms forward, showing everyone my puncture scars. "It means that you are neither a ghost nor a weapon. You can chain yourself to a weapon to do the bidding of Hell, and once chained, you will never be free again. As a weapon, you will become a slave and a source of misery for all, including yourself. Or you can decide differently and become a ghost, chained by nothing, wandering about without a true path in the world until your works cancel each other out and you fade away."

I halted, waiting for the young man's reaction. The terror and dread of the hall had dissipated, replaced by confusion and a sad hunger. The candidates' inner pain was grasped in the palm of another. Pasco crossed his arms and nodded for me to continue. He knew that there was more. There had to be more to their fates than what I'd offered them. His faith shook me to the core.

I spoke to the entire room, "Would you chain yourself, one slave to another? Once Emperor, the Damogir has become a slave to the Pestilent Lower Prince of Hell and the Infernal plague that feeds them. He will never be unchained. He knows it, and so do his *Get*."

"Do we have any choice?" said Hani Thule, her father's daughter rising to the surface. Her eyes remained firmly locked on the table in front of her.

The Damogir certainly had a choice, decades before, and he'd taken the darkest option, forcing everyone in Niantia to pay the price.

"I bet your father asked himself that same question."

“He offered me to the Damogir even as he searched for a means of escape,” she replied.

“And that is the final answer, isn’t it? You must lean into the wind and own it. You must find your path despite it. Fight for what is right and carry on in the face of sacrifice, misery, and doubt. As you falter, double your resolve, rely on your connections to those around you, and push through the black cloud that clings to your mind.” I turned my gaze back to Pasco. “A weapon doesn’t have a heart, nor does a demon or a ghost, but you do, so use it and follow your own path. Don’t look to the dark Emperor or his slaves to decide it.”

Pasco nodded and held out his hand.

I gave him the consecration of *Sorrow*. “Brother, watch it bleed.”

Chapter 14

Black Guard

Before going on, let's just say that I consecrated everyone in that room, handling the women in a decidedly more careful manner, and at the end of the afternoon, I was feeling parched. By the time Rask unlocked the doors of the dining hall and servants rolled in carts with a warm dinner, all the candidates had been marked, and *Sorrow* had feasted well on the Black corruption that seemed to adhere to members of the Damogir's bloodline.

After dinner, everyone returned to their rooms in the keep, and no one would be allowed to step outside without my approval. The candidates were kept on the first two floors and not allowed to mix.

It had been a day of culling that would continue until done. Mister Rask gave me a key to the basement's prison. I entered the dimly lit underground corridor and counted my way forward to Careck's cell. It housed a demon, not a man, and even though we'd all tried to pretend otherwise, one day spent with those that shared my bloodline proved the folly of my ways. The doses of Black should have been enough to confirm the irreversible inhuman nature of the being that lay chained to the wall in the eighth cell.

My anger at the Black presence bubbled forth yet again. I hammered the demon with my accumulated rage until the outpouring of my grief had subdued us both. With nowhere to run, I drew Second Fang and plunged it into Careck's heart. I closed my eyes in case the body reacted. *Koki-Ten* consumed the remaining soul shard of Careck, drawing it into its Black cage without a single word of thanks.

Long stolen away by a darker power, Careck had never been my brother; he'd only been the shell of a miserable likeness, a gray-eyed ripper to haunt my dreams and drag me astray. I swapped daggers and scoured First Fang clean, blasting the imbued dagger with enough Fury to turn a Horde and leaving not a spark inside to sustain it. Careck's former dagger disintegrated in my hand.

Sitting for hours in the near darkness of the cell, I watched the last light of an oil lamp fade from the empty eyes of my dead brother. I wiped the dried blood from his chin.

Emerging from the depths, I handed the dungeon key back to Mister Rask and asked that the body be burned immediately. The servants gave me a wide berth and the entire top floor of the keep. The beds were passable. I locked myself in and, for once, found a mercifully quiet sleep.

A persistent knocking at the door brought me back to life.

Feth.

"What?" I yanked the door open into the frightened eyes of Hani Thule. Beside her, Mister Rask almost jumped out of his skin, and a third person, Pasco Gale, lurked beside the doorway.

"Sir," said Rask. "You have visitors waiting downstairs. They won't be put off any longer."

Being almost naked, I was ready for a bath, and I felt better for the solid night's rest. "How long was I out?"

"It's been almost two days since we've seen you," said Pasco. "Folks were beginning to think that Rask killed you and burned your body."

"Did you burn the body, Mister Rask?"

He nodded.

"Mister Rask, please send someone up to sort a bath and clean my armor. Tell our visitors that I will be down shortly to meet them."

Rask nodded again and left.

"Pasco Gale, Miss Thule, please come in."

"Hani," she said as she followed Pasco into the room.

I threw on a dirty shirt and threw open the suite's curtains. A late morning light stung my eyes. From my window, we could see the

mountains to the north. Lacking winter's hard touch, they were mostly brown, but in the far distance, a volcano worked its fiery magic.

I sat on a couch while servants arrived to heat up a bath in the other room.

"Hani, please sit with me," I said. "My name is Ara Storm."

She didn't waste any time getting to the bottom of things, "You don't look like a Fuga general. How old are you?"

Pasco stood at the window and left her to it. I could feel the man's hidden smile.

"Almost twenty, like everyone else here," I replied. "And no, I'm only a Colivarian colonel and a member of the Order of the Vigil. It's a King-sanctioned clan of demon-fighting warriors."

Pasco coughed, correcting me without even looking back. There was no doubt that I was born of the Damogir's bloodline, that I was Nantine.

Brother Pasco.

Removing the false brother, one that kept me chained in anger, had freed me in unexpected ways. The need for violence and dominance had fled while I slept as if the vile beast had been feeding me a daily Black dose and a darker path to follow. Perhaps it had been its chosen end, or perhaps I had made a mistake. Still, culling the dark presence had been a necessity and a fitting end to the day's rites of passage.

I stood and held out my hand.

He took it, unsure of what it meant.

Spying a volcano in the distance, I searched through a rugged landscape, finding a calloused power in a man without a path. "Pasco, where are you from?"

"Nowhere anymore. The city of Gull was destroyed three years ago."

"I've been there. It travels with me still."

"What will you do with us? With them?" He nodded at Hani.

"Nothing. Careck is dead, burned to ash, as are all his fellow *Get*. The enforcers of the Damogir are no more."

"You are of the *Get*, are you not?" said Hani. "You said that you

destroyed the Vanguard Army.”

“It was a lesson for the Nantines and their use of the Black. Their unwarranted aggression killed my brother.”

“You have a family?” said Pasco.

“An adopted one and a wife. How about you?”

“Why bother? If the *Get* ever found out, those I cared about would be at risk.”

“And your mother?” I asked.

“She remains alive because I’m here. Yours?”

“I never really knew her. She left me in Colivar when I was seven.”

“Most likely, she’s dead, or a sibling was taken north in your place.”

Runa’s face came to mind. *Or a limb.*

“No sense in feeling sorry for myself if that was the price for my freedom,” I said.

“What did you do to us the other day? I haven’t felt this sane in years.”

“Our blood is cursed. If you haven’t figured it out, we’re sons of the Damogir and half-brothers. Our blood seems to collect the Black energy that’s so pervasive in this land, or in my case, the Mad Black. Over time it wears us down and drives us crazy.”

“Is that what happened to Careck?”

“No. He was destroyed years ago when he ascended to First Fang. The death-demon chained him and rode him like a beast, taking all of his control and humanity away.”

“Is that why you killed him?” said Hani.

“It, not him. And mostly, yes. I couldn’t bear another day in its presence and found it a fitting end to the culling of the Black.”

Hani had been working up her courage for the next question, “When will we be heading north to Qrey?”

“You won’t. None of you will be going anywhere near the Emperor or the Damogir. You’ve all been marked and are no longer his to claim. Let me sort things with the Army, and we’ll talk more during dinner.”

“How do you have the power to do such a thing?” Pasco leaned forward. “We are nothing but property, and yet you come along and

claim us?"

"Pasco, for a brother, you ask a lot of questions. Have you asked Hani how she plans to find her father? I have connections in Fugaku that can offer her family aid and shelter."

"And what do you get out of it?"

"A brother that I won't have to kill for asking too many questions."

He leaned back, "That sounds like a deal."

The dining hall held two dozen officers of the Nantine Guard Army, the heads of each regiment and their seconds. It was a good crowd; their uniforms and weapons were clean and sharp. Perhaps they'd heard about the ample food or the potential number of women to warm their beds. I had Rask lock us in after I took my seat at the raised table.

I began with a clear, concise introduction for once, "I carry the demon's relic, Second Fang."

Confusion rolled throughout the room, but little doubt, as I inserted the dagger into the hardwood table before me. As predicted, one severely unhappy officer stood in confusion before being tugged back down into his chair. The man was too young to be a general or even a colonel, and his red face carried a harsh message about the state of things.

When I didn't elaborate on my position, an older gentleman stood. "I am General Adwain Lorus, commander of the Guard Army. We defend the Damogir from outside threats."

I barked out a laugh at that. "General, as far as I can tell, you cower around the *Get* and feast upon the scraps that they leave you. Furthermore, it's our realm, not the Damogir, that needs defending."

Another red face appeared, and I stood up to Adwain. "Let's all be clear about a few things before we proceed. I'm not here to pretend that Niantia exists except in ruin, and I expect you, as officers of our realm, to take a big bite of the same apple. Would anyone here disagree?"

I tugged *Koki-Ten* from the table and placed the silent threat back in a sheath across my back, out of sight but never out of mind. The room remained silent, confused, perhaps unsure at whom or why

they were angry.

“Now’s your chance to speak freely,” I said, wondering about their current motives.

Each officer present was fully armed and armored. I hoped that they also owned some strong shields.

The red-faced captain stood again. “How did you come to wield Second Fang?”

“And who are you?”

“Captain Anzor Dawe, second in the Heavy Foot Brigade.”

Dawe wore a breastplate, vambraces, and an intimidating sword. The man’s anger was mixed with shock and sadness. Much like my wife, he’d picked a most dangerous mate and suffered for it.

“Captain, you’ve asked a question most pertinent to everyone here, and I will offer three answers. First, I am of the bloodline of the Damogir. Second, I removed the head of the fang’s previous slave. Be assured that Bengla didn’t suffer beyond the burden that she already carried. Third, the demon chose me as its new host.”

Bengla had carried two burdens that day, and both had survived where she had not. The first was present, held within an unseen cage, while the second existed far from where we stood and was known to but a few. Now was not the time to follow it further.

“Any other questions from the room?” I said.

“Where is Careck?” said General Lorus.

“Broken, dead, and burned, as are all of the Claws. Only the Second Fang remains in Niantia.”

Everyone sat down at that remark, offering a moment of stunned silence. I sat too.

I needed Second Fang if I were to have any chance at entering Greyl and reaching the Emperor. Holding a large shard of the alpha, I was in a position of power when it came to negotiation.

“This brings me back to the state of the Guard Army. Are you also broken and ready to be burned?”

The reactions began with fear and quickly roused themselves to anger at the casual threat. The Army had been a stable power that did little other than guarantee their own survival in a realm that had fallen to pieces around them. I smiled and drew on their dark

emotions, pulling forth the fear and soaking up the anger, twisting it into a ball of Fury and holding it unseen over their heads.

"I am at a disadvantage, sir. What is your name? What should we call you?" said General Lorus.

"My name is Ara Storm, Prince of Niantia, but you may call me 'the Devil,' for all I care."

The General had two choices, none of them palatable. I smiled and waited for his response. He opted for his own well-trod middle ground.

"Lord Storm, the Army continues in its duty to defend the Damogir."

"General, you guard a corpse. Where is the duty in that? Someday, the wake must end, and the living must be served."

"We have no choice in the matter."

"General, there is always a choice. Look at the fate of the Vanguard Army. They died, not because of their decision, but for the method that they used to reach it. They called upon the Black to breach the border with Fugaku and ended up being consumed by it."

"What else can we do?"

"You can prepare to march south, leaving the Queen's Hold tomorrow. The Damogir's Horde has already moved south into Trespass and will soon move to besiege the city-state of Bastian. You will destroy the Horde and return to defend the Queen's Hold."

"Ah, what?" he said.

"You now have a choice. The pass south into the valley of Bastian is narrow enough for an army to control and avoid being overrun. The Horde, now somewhat weakened, will be assaulting the city's walls. A sizable force from Colivar is due to arrive to break the siege, but they'll need all the help they can get. It can be done, given your full commitment. The future of Niantia depends on it."

The General's immediate future depended on it too, as did that of every man in the room. I'd locked the doors for a reason.

"How does the demon allow it?" said Lorus.

"What did Captain Dawe say when you asked him that?" I replied.

Intrigued by the answer, I drew *Koki-Ten* and rattled her cage as I waited for the General's response, "Why?"

"Some hearts are weaker than others. I sought to find a stronger purchase among the Second Fang's heart, but she kept the world at bay, starving herself and offering little to sustain me."

Captain Dawe's affair with Bengla had been another attempt by Koki-Ten to manipulate the Nantine landscape, twisting it into a small acre of Hell.

"And then you found another heart to ride and discarded Bengla," I thought.

"Our bargain was mine to end whenever I wanted."

"As is ours. You are free to jump into another host as soon as one presents itself on the tip of my blade."

"I must, or I will starve, entombed in this casket of War."

"Welcome to my world, Koki-Ten."

"Lord Storm, Captain Dawe was of the impression that the demon wanted to spread its influence, and we certainly needed the funds to sustain our ranks." The General suddenly seemed eager, almost greedy in his thoughts.

I'd seen the look before, the addiction to the doses of Black that had infiltrated the Gray Houses of Colivar. As useful as it might be to me in this situation, there wasn't any more to be had, nor did I have any more satchels of gems to bribe General Lorus. The drops of my blood that had marked the candidates were almost more than I should have offered, but they were a sorry-looking bunch. I'd needed a break from the constant looks of fear and scorn-filled expressions that judged my daily existence.

And then, it hit me. General Adwain's contentment while watching his realm dissolve without a fight, his confusion when given the opportunity to act, and his eagerness for more *Kjaira* blood all pointed to a familiar source and its control of the world around it.

"Koki-Ten, let go of these men. Our path lies in another direction."

The demon laughed in my head with a hiss, *"Release me, first."*

Another round of negotiations had begun. The death of First Fang flashed through my mind.

The death-demon shrieked out, *"You wouldn't dare,"* startling every man in the room.

The officers couldn't have heard it, but they'd certainly felt it, and

their fear sky-rocketed, pouring out in a great wave. I pulled it forth, catching and converting it into the most basic rage. In an instant, it was mine, a lever to pry the demon from her position of power and influence.

Koki-Ten was correct in that I wouldn't dare destroy her now, but I'd learned to see and sever the demon's alien hold on the world. Sheathing *Koki-Ten*, I released a wave of Fury upon the room and charged, tracking down its dark residue. *Koki-Ten* knew what was coming and tried to move her pets, but her hold was subtle, more of an influence than an urge.

By the time I'd reached the far side of the room, every officer was down on the floor nursing a shallow wound or holding their head, cursing the day that they were born. With every strike by *Sorrow*, I'd punched out with a burst of Black fury, searing the surface of their minds and burning the stale threads that sought to hold them in place. I could have pulled the strands of the death-demon's soul to me, but I didn't want to risk the Mad Black that it offered. Instead, I provided a telling lesson for *Koki-Ten* as it watched me clip its tendrils one by one, dissolving each in an instant of Black fire.

I walked slowly around the room, helping men back to their feet and giving them time to find themselves. The iron-filled scent of gashes, stabs, and nosebleeds permeated the air. For the cast of hardened warriors, this seemed to help, reminding the officers that they were among wolves, not sheep.

The General was having the roughest time, shaking his head and trying to focus. He'd been caught deeper in the demon's trap than most of his fellow officers. He moaned, "What the devil just happened?"

"As you say, General. Now, if you'd all please take your seats, we'll get on with lunch and discuss tomorrow's order of march."

Chapter 15

Queen's Guard

“General, how are you supplied here in the middle of nowhere?”

As far as I knew, there wasn't anything but ruins for hundreds of miles in every direction, and yet the Queen's Hold and the Army endured.

“We escort caravans to and from the east coast. Two sizable ports remain off-limits to the Horde if the cities continue to provide for our realm. It seems that even the *Get* prefer to eat.” General Lorus had loosened up and, while he still eyed me with suspicion, we had bigger concerns to discuss.

I'd given the officers an hour to pull themselves together and hash out their position on the war as the keep's servants readied the afternoon meal. I'd roused the candidates, male and female, to join us in the dining hall, and they'd received uniformed silence as a greeting as we entered.

“General, the escort duty must continue. You will only bring a token force of mounted troops to scout your way south, leaving the rest of the cavalry to protect the Queen's Hold and run routes to both coasts. Kelton to the southwest still exists, and any support from the Guard Army will go a long way for that city's morale.”

“And what about them?” The General pointed with his fork.

“No one touches the candidates without my consent and theirs. Some will be escorted home. Others will stay here in the hold throughout the coming war.”

The word ‘war,’ like a *Kjaira's* voice, seemed to reach everyone in the dining room, and the General looked like he'd taken too big a bite

at the wrong time.

He coughed, "Whose side are you on?"

"The Queen's," I said.

"The last I'd heard, the Queen died at the hands of the dark elves in Bastian."

I didn't know exactly how she died. Ylamil had never explained it fully, but the Queen had left the dark path of the Emperor, preferring exile to enslavement.

"Perhaps, but she had the right of it when she slipped from the grasp of the Damogir."

It may have sounded like an accusation, but it was the truth. General Lorus certainly took it that way and owned his fate.

"Lord Storm, we have finally reached the same conclusion as Queen Tiasa, though it might be twenty years too late. Our counterparts in the Vanguard Army have already paid for their choices, and now, we must pay for ours. We will march as ordered, heading south at dawn."

"The dark elves of Bastian and the Colivarians are your allies in this fight. My wife is among them. She is the daughter of Queen Tiasa and King Ylamil."

That declaration spurred more than a few remarks.

"And yet you are here?" said Lorus.

"Not for long. My trek to Qreyl resumes after you leave."

"Lord Storm, no one returns from that city the same as they went in. It is the source of the Damogir's power."

"You speak from experience?"

"We all do. How did you break the spell?"

"There is more than one Black Power laying claim to this land. I ask for your forgiveness if I fail."

"Forgiveness? If such a thing still exists, you will have to look far beyond my own soul to find it."

"General, let me show you how." I waved to Captain Anzor Dawe, asking him to join us. "Captain, please have a seat. I would like to discuss your relationship with the Second Fang of the Damogir."

Dawe's relationship with Bengla had been hidden among the schemes of the *Get*, and I certainly doubted that he'd shared it with

anyone, including General Lorus. The captain only nodded at my remark.

“Captain Dawe, I had a chance to meet the former Second Fang and speak with her at length before the beast reasserted itself and launched an ambush on my company. She carried a secret to her grave, along with the four Claws that accompanied her in the attack.”

“A secret?” said Dawe. “To the grave?”

“Yes. Something incredible considering all that I’ve learned since then about the *Get of the Damogir* and the beast that drives them. Any guesses as to what it might be?”

Captain Dawe’s face reddened, not in anger this time, but in an awareness of his commanding officer’s stare. “She should never have taken the Challenge. It was a mistake,” said Dawe.

“Careck thought the same but never explained why. Still, I would have to be blind not to understand the sentiment or the struggle the woman faced and the impossible choices she’d made. My life bears a similar secret, having been abandoned in Colivar when I was a child.”

The captain looked up, scanning my eyes for the truth. It was a sure sign of his courage.

“She left a message for you, Captain, right before the demon locked her away forever.”

“What did she say?”

“I’m not certain, but I think it was a name, Jarrla. She screamed it with all that remained of her heart.”

Dawe struggled to reply, “It means ‘little lion.’ She used to mock me with that name, making fun of my proud rank among a lost army.”

“And her name?”

“Bengla means ‘little heart.’ It allowed her to succeed in the Blood Challenge where so many others failed.”

It was a fair omen and far more poetic than ‘magata,’ the Nantine tag for one completely barren of heart.

“I still suffer terribly from that day,” I said. “But, far beyond the walls of Bastian, forgiveness lives like a little lion.”

General Lorus was perceptive, catching the newfound glint in his

captain's eye. "You'll be ready to march south tomorrow, Captain Dawe? The Queen's Guard is about to take the field, and the Heavy Foot will anchor our line."

"Sir, with your permission, we shall lead the column."

There was only so much I could show them in the few hours we had before they packed up and left, but I made sure to relate the fall of the Vanguard Army and how they should advance in a shield wall formation once they entered the Bastian Pass. The heavy foot soldiers carried their shields across their backs as they began the march south, leaving a cavalry brigade, a thousand men and horses, behind. Four thousand troops marched to block the pass between Bastian and Niantia.

Of the male candidates for ascension to *Get of the Damogir*, only eight remained. The others, lacking the zeal and the true seed of the Damogir, were sent on their way home, wherever that may be. Usually, the culling would have ended their lives, taking what belonged to the Damogir and leaving nothing for the families to mourn. For the time being, the central plains of Niantia were as clear and safe as they could be for travel.

Of the host of women, most left for the city of Gaston on the east coast, riding along with a sizable escort from the cavalry brigade, and a few headed southwest with the company of horse troopers for Duke Kelton. More dispatches flowed with them from the Prince of Niantia.

The day of departures had left me with eight half-brothers and Hani Thule. Being the daughter of a colonel, Hani outranked the rest, so I put her in charge of the Queen's Hold. While each of the male candidates was fierce beyond measure, Hani's courage and resolve spoke volumes about her heart, and even though the land had sapped most of the color from her physical being, she was ready to take her post.

A late winter's rain rolled across the central plains, dousing the Queen's Hold and washing away the Army's dust. The downpour was astoundingly cold as I stood in the keep's courtyard, eyes closed, pretending I was the only one there. With its blanketing chill, the

rain hid the physical world around me, allowing me to consider the impact of my trip so far and hiding the shame as it leaked from my eyes. Rain can't wash away regret no matter how numb it makes you.

The face of Careck was fresh in my mind as I spoke, "Pasco, stand aside."

My brothers had lined up before me in the courtyard of the keep. The culling was over, but the sorting of their eight souls had only begun. The eight half-brothers were wholly strangers to my life, and I felt like I should be apologizing for what I had done and what I was about to do next.

"Don't. We're not what you think," said Pasco.

"How do you know what I think?"

"I can see it in your face. We all can. So, give us some credit for standing here unarmed."

Only Pasco seemed calm for the moment and unburdened by my presence. He was beyond us all in that regard. The other seven seemed to oscillate between fear and the need to fight while I sought a path forward that would allow them to remain in my life without the need for more violence. It was a lost cause. We were bred for chaos and violence, and each of us would have to sort our lives in our own way.

"I've spent my life without any real family until this month," I said.

Another of the eight, his name Kestrel Roush, spoke up, "What happened to Careck? He was your brother too."

But not our brother.

"Master Roush, Careck was destroyed by the Damogir when he ascended to First Fang. I freed what was left of his soul and removed a burden from us all."

"Then are we free to leave like all the others?" he replied.

"And go where? How long will you last with the Black curse that haunts our bloodline? There should be far more than eight. There should be dozens, maybe hundreds, now dead."

It was the blood curse that drove the strongest offspring into the clutches of the Damogir. I was more than certain of it, having felt its relentless pull. It explained the urge to continue my journey onward

to Qreyl. Those brothers that came of age would be hard-pressed to deny it, and the fact that there were only nine standing here in the rain said everything about our realm's response to the Damogir's seed.

"Is that what it was? A curse?" said Pasco Gale.

I might not have sounded sure as I replied, "Or a blessing, depending on how you choose to live with it."

Pasco had seen the scars that I wore, and he saw through my hesitant words. "What was your choice?"

I hadn't had one, not like my brothers did now. The curse had called yet another demon, one darker and more determined than *Koki-Ten*, through the Veil that separated our world from the Infernal Domain. The choices I had made since were a plague on my life, and I couldn't reach the end of my path soon enough.

Feth.

Pasco took a step away, losing some of his confidence as an intense rage leaked from my mind.

I offered the group my confession, "Pasco, my choice was to become a prince without a realm. I traded away my little sister so that I could end one war in time to start another in the court of a fallen emperor. I've murdered and chained those that stood in my way. I left my wife and company in Bastian, calling the Damogir's Horde down upon them so that they couldn't follow me to someplace even worse. I ended my brother Careck's existence in a bid to avoid becoming him, and, after everything, it might be too late."

"You forgot the part where you choose to help rebuild our realm anew," said another brother, Fever Harrow, obviously an optimist.

"No, I didn't forget. I merely play to my strengths. Others will have to rebuild it once they are free to do so. They will need protectors when the time comes."

"So, you're a protector?"

"I have a certain reach. To some, I am a man to be feared, and yet, to others, I am exceedingly worse."

"Worse than the Damogir and his plague?"

Almost.

“Fever, we all better hope that I am, and no, you’re the protectors. Each of you will begin walking that path today, and you must never leave it. The future of everyone depends on your strength and ability. I ask that you help preserve whatever is left of Niantia when it awakens from its nightmare.”

I removed *Sorrow* and its sheath, handing the fang-dagger to Pasco. “This weapon has been with me from the beginning of my journey, one that began in the frontier city of Lockrun in Colivar. It is yours. Use it to consume the Black curse of your brothers as it grows and defend the Queen’s Hold until the Army returns.”

Pasco took a moment to reply, “Ara, you forgot the part about having someone to watch your back and keep you in line.”

“You’re right. I did. I’ve never had a real family to lean on or blood brothers to bend my path without having to kill them.”

“Welcome to our world,” said Kestrel Roush.

“And a beautiful world it will be if you stick together. You are the Prince’s Guard, and your pack training begins today.”

Chapter 16

Road Rage

In Colivar, the King's Realm Guard is an elite faction of knights sworn to protect the King and relied upon to turn a battle whenever it needed turning. I'd recruited five of the Knight-Guards to protect members of Company Storm in Maidenhall. Vigil Tila Wind and the Storm Company Consul each had a pair as bodyguards, and Ben Heck, the true brother of my surrogate aunt, Laila Storm, had another to watch his back. In becoming Major Heck, newly recommissioned in the Realm Guard, Ben was also a vaunted Knight-Guard.

After three days on the road, training with Pasco, Kestrel, and the rest of my brothers, I'd match my eight against any of the King's elites. Having grown up under a specter of terror and constant challenge, the candidates were rare survivors. Few of the Damogir's bloodline reached a ready age, and as such, properly armed and armored with the best equipment that the Nantine Heavy Cavalry could offer them, the eight brothers were lethal and extremely hard to overcome.

The Damogir's seed brought a curse with it, but it also offered an awareness to each bearer without the need for a death-demon's control to cement the bond. Unchained, we worked on that awareness, sensing the emotions and moves of those brothers around us. For me, being super-empathic had become a way of life. My ability to push and pull on the energy of others made a useful teaching tool for the Storm Prince's Guard.

"You'll have to tone it down before we reach Qreyl," said Pasco. "Otherwise, you won't fit in."

"What do you know about the city?" I said.

"Only what I've heard from those that have been there. They act as if they've been drained, muted by it all. Complacent."

"I'm not planning on going unnoticed."

"But the plague will find you. It's more than a curse."

"The plague already has." I didn't have any doubt about that.

A shard of the Infernal plague lived within my mind, a parting gift from a Pestilent baron beneath Maidenhall. The plague visions were inner wounds that I couldn't heal myself; the caustic tremors of unreality remained locked behind the stoutest of walls until I could release them and be cleansed. Qreyl must be the place for their return. It called to me, and I heeded its cry, seeking my salvation.

What better source for healing than the source of a plague? It didn't have to make sense.

The plague was a dead end and a perfect topic to avoid with my newfound brothers. I changed the subject, "Pasco, what can you tell me about Tumo Storm?"

Besides Pasco Gale, Kestrel Roush, and Fever Harrow, I was joined by brothers Jackal Wise, Fell Harrow, Tumo Storm, Dak Hays, and Caolin Sands. Like me, Tumo had grown up an orphan, discarded at a young age, and left without a last name. I corrected that immediately and offered the same to the rest of the pack. A pack was about belonging, first and last.

At first glance, Tumo seemed slower than the rest, but he was also the strongest of the eight, physically and mentally, if given a chance to walk unburdened. An overabundance of scars on an otherwise sensitive soul weighed him down along with an old, poorly set break to his leg. He would never have survived the Blood Challenge with that limp, no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

Riding behind me, Tumo grunted.

With too many walled-off souls, none of us had gotten fully used to the pack concept, but it was time to start.

"He's always in pain, which explains his grunting," said Pasco.

Having pain for an uncle, I knew Tumo better than the rest. "And it makes for a remarkable amount of self-control."

Of the eight, Pasco Gale seemed the most taken with the idea of

having true brothers. Life alone on the streets had been hard for him. Being more perceptive than most, Pasco had worked from an early age for the boss in Gaston, one of Niantia's remaining cities on the east coast. He'd risen through the ranks from watcher to hand to enforcer, relying on his *clear sight* ability and a knack for learning to fight. Pasco wouldn't back down from anyone, not even the boss, so it was to the relief of all that he'd been called west for the Blood Challenge. He used his eyes and his mouth before his weapons, giving us all a fine example to follow.

Dak Hays was a farmer's son. He'd grown up out in the countryside, sheltered more than most, and had lived a fairly sane life until the last couple of years when the Black began to creep in. Only recently, his mother had told Dak what he must do and sent him on his way. He'd had almost eighteen years of family to back his future, and I valued the image of sanity he still carried.

Having grown up wielding an axe and a scythe, Dak had plenty of coordination and brawn but lacked the finer skills and the earnest experience of fighting another man to survive. The young man would have never survived the Blood Challenge or the culling if Careck was in charge. A quick glance at Pasco after our first night's sparring told me that he saw the same and would work to rectify the gap.

Fever and Fell Harrow were perhaps the scariest two of our clan. They were identical twins with vastly different personalities. Fever was outspoken with an optimistic view and a staunchly protective nature, especially for his brother. Fell was the silent type, his mind was hard to read, and he often struggled to read it himself. The pair seemed determined to watch each other's back, so I sparred with them simultaneously during our training breaks on the road and watched them work flawlessly together. If the Damogir had claimed these two together as Claws, I could only imagine the terror they'd offer. Careck would have seen it too.

Kestrel Roush and Caolin Sands were both from the east coast. Roush from Monmouth, another sizable, sanctioned port, and Sands from an outlying town. 'Outlying town' might have meant bandit lair or itinerant dive. Sands seemed to fit both and showed the expected

skills. He ditched his heavy sword for a foot-long blade, giving me something smaller to pit against *Koki-Ten's* fang-dagger during each session.

Roush was a force to be steered. While Sands was easily the smallest of the eight, Roush had the most imposing form. Tall and well-muscled with a dusky eastern complexion, Kestrel reminded me of Gunner Trew with his composure and stance. Kestrel used a heavy sword as it was intended and offered *Exile* a fair workout. He was another that had lived with his family before being conscripted into the Duke of Monmouth's local militia as a way to spare everyone his growing, volatile temper. We discussed his drive at length during our sparring sessions and the need to practice patience before, during, and after a fight.

As the huge, dormant volcano came into sight on the northern horizon, the plague grew into a blurry hunger calling me home. Its lure was guarded by the Horde that ringed the city of Qreyl. Instead of the Black Wind spilling forth, a persistent, vile energy, almost a cyclone, circled the city, brushing past the spires that poked above the distant caldera's rim.

Perhaps this was the source of the hunger that drove the Damogir's seed to welcome ascension or to die trying. To become immune, jacketed in the soul of a death-demon, seemed a simple, worthy solution to the drain of life that reached every heart in the realm. Being this close to Qreyl, everyone in our group leaned back slightly, trying to resist it. If not for our horses, many of my brothers would have staggered at the onerous demands in the distance. It was a good first test of my power and the last chance to clear my head before entering the Pestilent Emperor's domain.

"Pasco, please hand me *Sorrow*." I used the dagger to nick the back of my hand and returned it.

The dagger consumed the sprouting tendrils of the Mad Black disease, lightening my mood.

"Give me one of your vambraces." I rubbed a few drops of my blood on the inner leather of each brother's vambrace, adding a soul imprint to the piece and creating a crude link to my power.

My inner warlord stirred at the new connections, sensing a new army to drive and protect—an *army of eight*.

“What did you do?” said Roush. He almost smiled in relief. “Why didn’t you do this sooner?”

“And let you all miss the fun?” In truth, I hadn’t noticed their unnatural thirst until we’d spotted Qreyl on the horizon.

Tumo chuckled behind me, shocking everyone.

“Something to add, Tumo?”

“My leg doesn’t hurt half as bad as it did a moment ago. Did you do that?”

Tumo suffered constantly. A thread of painful energy pulsed its way across the blood bond, gathering in the back of my mind. I placed my hand on the hilt of *Koki-Ten*, changing the pain into a hardened rage and wrapping the demon’s cage in another potent layer. As a sorcerer of the Black, I could convert the pain into a ready source of power. Tumo’s expression eased further as I consciously reached out and pulled on the link between us.

Freed from a curse of a different sort, Tumo laughed with joy. He kicked his horse and rode a circle around us, letting go of his constant tension. “Ten years,” he howled. “For the first time in ten years, I don’t feel my leg.”

Koki-Ten, for its part, found little amusement in the wall of its prison growing thicker. In my mind, it hissed in frustration. To the *Kjaira*, pain was a tool for distraction and control, a weapon in the arsenal of a devious assassin. It was wholly unsuitable for the walls of a prison. Knowing plenty about pain, I agreed, funneling more of my own fury into the mix.

With every step taken through the ruined land of Niantia, I’d been learning the way of the *Kjaira*. Careck had done me one favor, having righted my lingering misperception that an alpha *Kjaira* was a potential weapon against the forces of Hell. Alpha *Kjaira* were the epitome of Hell, unbending and bound by their heartless nature to manipulate, terrorize, and destroy.

The alphas’ brood structure and dominance were a strength but also a weakness. Less dominant members of a brood could accept a subservient role as they chained themselves to a human heart, but

never a brood's alpha. It had to take over completely or, failing that, break free by destroying its host. There was nothing in between, no compromise that would ever suit.

Koki-Ten's aim from the beginning had been to subjugate my heart to its will. My bitter rage at Careck had been a response to the Black soul's intent, and I used every opportunity to bind the *Kjaira* ever more tightly in its cage, giving it a taste of its own brew.

Being from a House of Death, it couldn't alter the constructs of War or break the shackles that held it in place. *Koki-Ten* could only wait for its freedom and the chance to be reborn in the Infernal Domain. I'd allowed it to live on in our domain, but by locking it in place within the fang-dagger, I had sent it a clear message. We didn't have a contract, and I wasn't betting my life that it would do me any favors.

If only my war ended with *Koki-Ten* and not an enormous, plague-ridden city, I might be heading home, wherever that might be. I had enough scars to last me a lifetime and the power to heal others. That should have been enough.

Cat had promised to forgive me if I came back. I held onto that thought, letting go of the dagger's hilt. Tumo's pain continued to flow. Finding a new target, it wrapped itself around the powerful plague visions that I carried. My eyesight dimmed for a moment, and I almost toppled.

As my vision briefly cleared, I found Tumo, "Thank you," I said.

Slowly, I slid from my horse, letting the rough road catch my fall.

Lady Winter brushed her fingers through my gray hair, so close and yet so far from the madness she'd left behind. Her platinum blonde locks framed crystal blue eyes and cherry red lips in an enticing blend. Her courtly gown fit her form perfectly, and her lap was abundantly soft.

"We were never lovers," I said. "Never."

"And that is where you went wrong," she smiled, enjoying the warm sun and the cool breeze around us. "You used me and threw me away."

Her stare was serene, sure, at odds with the mind that she cradled

beneath her bosom. We'd used each other, that was fair, but I was the one discarded and left empty in the end.

"You were a weapon," I admitted. "And you enjoyed yourself."

The vision of Lady Winter, a perfect illusion, felt real and utterly sincere as she spoke, "I was a weapon with a heart, one that you unlocked and called forth. I couldn't resist."

"Some hearts must be locked away for the world's protection," I replied. *Some heartless assassins and some visions, too.*

"What about yours?"

"Mine?"

"It still beats for many, yet no one can hear its call except me."

"How?" I said.

She spelled out the ongoing theme of my life, "A heart's connections can never be severed. You have fallen for the *Kjaira's* trap as it has fallen for yours."

"How do you know this?"

"You weren't the first to conquer a *Kjaira* in this world, nor were you the first to be destroyed by one."

"But I still live," I whispered, waiting eagerly for her confirmation.

Slowly, the image of Lady Winter began to fade, her cold grasp receding with her reply, "As do I, Ara Storm. As do I."

"He seems happy. Don't wake him up."

"Too late."

Feth.

I opened my eyes to Tumo's smiling face. Besides a once broken leg, the young man wielded a crooked smile and an off-center nose. Those had to have hurt, too.

"Brother, welcome back."

"Tumo, please help me up, slowly."

The thread of pain still flowed from the over-broken man, and I took conscious hold of it along with his hand.

Tumo was stocky and strong, a brawler. He lifted me up with little effort and held me in place against Daur until I could stand on my own.

Pasco waited, wanting to know what had happened but unsure if

he should ask.

“Give me a minute,” I begged. I was still dealing with Tumo’s rough start in life.

The man was solid, and his soul seemed to utter ‘Hit me, I can take it,’ with every thump of his heart. The abuse had begun early in his life, long before it could be considered a two-sided brawl.

Clutching Tumo’s hand, drawing the man’s pain outward in amounts similar to that of my tortured sister Cress, I warmed myself at the fire behind it. I conscripted the harsh energy for my inner war and added layers to my defenses around the Infernal visions. The plague’s visions were a constant drain, their tendrils branching out into my heart and mind, slowly sapping my strength and taxing my will. Tumo’s pain had fed and distracted them, sating a sad hunger that I didn’t realize I carried until it was suddenly gone.

We were less than a day outside of Qreyl, and the words of Vigaila Grace collided with my own poor faith. Even if I couldn’t feel them, my connections still existed, and I needed to honor those before moving on. I didn’t understand the weight of the witch’s wisdom, but my experience with the *Kjaira* made her insight ring true. Every trap began with an illusion, and with alpha *Kjaira*, everything was a trap. Just ask the Damogir.

“Let’s all take a break,” I said. “Now’s as good a time as any to discuss what happens next.”

The heavy tug of the new blood connections helped the young men all around me stand a bit straighter. They didn’t need to suffer their lifelong separation or the growing appetite of the Infernal plague ahead.

“Tumo, you’ve got a long trip to make. You will ride with Jack and find our sister in Fugaku. Jack, you are Tumo’s bodyguard. I don’t want to see anything else broken on him the next time we meet.”

Jackal Wise had a name that suited him perfectly. He’d roamed the ruined lands of Niantia from the age of twelve, living off the dying and surviving by his wits. To call him soft would have been an insult to diamonds everywhere and a decidedly poor move. Jack preferred a long, wicked-looking knife but could wield a heavy sword with the best of the bunch and come out on top. He might have taken First

Fang in the Blood Challenge if it still existed, and it was time that he learned to protect someone besides himself.

I laid out the path for the pair, sending them southeast through the Akio Valley. I also outlined the stops they should make and the messages they should deliver along the way.

“How will she know us?” said Tumo.

“How can she not?” I replied. “But if she gives you a hard time, tell her that the Prince’s lip is almost healed.”

“And what do we do once we find her?” said Jack.

“You stay with her and protect her. You learn from Cressida and teach her what it means to have a real brother. Can you do that?” I was asking more for Jackal’s sake and staring hard at the man.

“Protect Tumo, protect Cressida. Can do. Who’ll watch my back?”

“You haven’t met our sister yet,” I said. “Show her kindness, or I will kill you myself.” I smiled when I said it, but I meant it. He got the message.

“Pasco and Dak will cover the center of Niantia, protecting the Queen’s Hold and supporting Hani Thule.”

Quick nods were a comfort in reply.

“Kestrel and Caolin, head south to the Trespass ruins and scout your way through the Rundil Pass to the city of Bastian. Find Company Storm and let them know that I’ve reached Qreyl. Let them know that another even larger Horde looms around Qreyl and that they should keep their distance.”

“What about the Horde positioned in that pass?” said Kestrel.

“I said ‘scout your way’ for a reason. If the defenders and the Guard Army have managed to engage the Horde and break it, there will be rogues and stragglers everywhere. Whatever you find out, report back to the Queen’s Hold.”

“And what about us?” Fever Harrow was eager to play his part.

“Fever and Fell will ride southwest for Kelton and inform Duke Asketil about the end of the *Get of the Damogir*. That should help calm him down. Lord Kelton owes his allegiance to the Prince of Niantia, and I want you to remind him that his cooperation and support will be crucial in the coming months.

“One more thing, I need you to check on the presence of a large

group of refugees, the survivors of Solander. They should have reached Kelton by now. If the Duke of Kelton has balked at letting them in, Kelton will be my next stop, right after Qreyl."

Fever gave me a look, rolling his eyes. "We'll convince him for you if that's the case. You already have your hands full."

I was glad for the help. "Fever, Duke Asketil can be difficult, but he kept his city alive while others faltered and died. We can't begin to rebuild without him, so choose your methods wisely. Start with the Captain of the Guard or Asketil's daughter if you get the brush off from the old man. They owe me plenty, and, as you said, I don't have the time to collect."

"Methods," said Fell, grinning, though at what I couldn't truly say.

"Everyone, use the Queen's Hold for communicating with each other and checking in. It will be your home until you choose otherwise. Lastly, if anyone claims to be of my family or my House, believe them and offer them all the help that you can."

"Help doing what?" said Fever.

"Whatever their hearts decide."

"What happened to you there?" Pasco pointed at Daur's empty saddle. "Another curse?"

"A bad wound and a blessing. Tumo shared his pain with me, and it found a plague vision tucked away in my mind."

"Methods," said Fell.

"Methods," I agreed.

Chapter 17

The Long Way Home

Up close, Qreyl was a city unlike any other, grander and full of ghosts. Surrounded by tall, circular walls constructed to withstand a siege, the Capital of Niantia sat in the enormous caldera of a long-dormant volcano. Beyond it, smoke and fire climbed from several distant mountains, marring the horizon far to the north.

A small, heavily organized town named Branoc existed at the outer edge of Qreyl's bowl-shaped mountain, in the southeast quadrant. Branoc spanned the base between the main southern road and a broad river that flowed west to east along the northside of the mountain toward the coast.

The main road from the south ended on the west side of the town. Another wide track zig-zagged its way up the volcano's side and disappeared over the lip, a mile above. When viewed from below, it seemed like a road to nowhere with constant wagon traffic rolling in each direction.

Up top, access to Qreyl was limited to a single sizable causeway that grew inward from the crater's southeastern rim. As bridges go, it was higher and longer than anything I'd ever seen; it spanned a moat full of demons below it. While you might not need an army when you have a caldera full of claws and chaos ringing your city, the tall walls were certainly a comforting option.

Branoc was a trading hub, controlling the flow of goods in and out of the Damogir's city. Customs agents guarded a deep gate through which everything flowed. The agents decided when each wagon would be allowed to make the trek upward and reacted to the needs

of the city above. The teamsters fed the city day and night. Wagons stacked with goods flowed up while empty ones rolled back down. Having a single, highly managed route into or out of the big city seemed terribly inefficient, but somehow it worked.

It was a daunting operation, and I was amazed at the lack of complaint on the lips and faces of those that participated. Perhaps there was a hidden benefit to working outside the city's walls. Seeing the hundreds, if not thousands of workers toiling in silence, repeating their tasks as if they were asleep, reminded me of the rolling city of Solander and the survivors that struggled almost without thought from the beginning to the end of each day.

Having said goodbye to my brothers twenty miles ago, I'd arrived beneath the mountain at dusk. Branoc contained what appeared to be whole neighborhoods of communal housing, taverns, and stables. Cattle pens and river-docks fed the operation, as did caravans from Gaston and Monmouth, rolling up the same south road that I'd followed.

I stopped outside the customs gate and tried to gauge the tonnage flowing into the main city. A single gated entrance seemed almost impossible for maintaining a city of that size. There had to be other ways in and out that I couldn't see.

"How may I help?" said a man wearing a uniform of sorts. He was unarmed, and his eyes lived in the growing shadows of lamps on the gate wall behind him.

I pointed to my chest, avoiding the hilt of *Koki-Ten*. *Exile* peered over my shoulder, and the monstrous hilt of a black sword poked out of its wrapping along Daur's hindquarter. My armor was less than immaculate after four days on the road but compared to the many teamsters and agents around me, I was an army of one, and I was in the way.

The man pointed upward at the plodding line of torch-bearing wagons, "The Blood Challenge has already occurred, but if you've come to participate, you should check-in at the main gate. There you will be notified of the next opportunity."

I drew *Koki-Ten*, "*Wake up. We've arrived.*"

Koki-Ten offered an annoyed hiss behind my eyes, "*We are only at*

the outer gate. We will speak further when we reach the altar."

My ring sparkled as I replaced the dagger. At least, *Madd Jak* was awake.

The helpful agent had fallen to the ground, burying his face in the turf. "My apologies, Blood Master. I didn't recognize you."

"What is your name, sir?" I said.

After an incoherent mumble, I told the man to stand and speak clearly.

"Cardil," he bowed. His fear was barely evident, the frequency of terror muted to a whisper. All those around me seemed similarly distant as they bowed.

"Cardil, have you met my brother, Careck?"

"Of course, but we haven't seen him in months."

"Does he have a residence in Qreyl?"

"I am sure he must. The captain of the main gate should know it." Cardil wanted nothing to do with me.

My mind itched at the man's apparent absence. I held out my hand, shocking everyone. I might not have felt it in their bones, but I could see it in the widening of their eyes.

Cardil stepped forward, carefully clasping my hand. His breathing settled, and there he was, his heart and soul riddled with a familiar emptiness. He offered a nod, "My apologies, Blood Master. I did not mean to offend."

I released his hand. "You did not offend, though I'm sure to encounter plenty that offends me at the end of this road."

Cardil bowed, holding his position until I'd turned and rode through the outer gate. Traffic on the switchbacks had halted during our conversation. It slowly cascaded back into motion in both directions, allowing me to see the contents of each cart as I rode past. The wagons downward were all empty to a team. Nothing was cast off from Qreyl, it seemed. All was consumed.

Each citizen existed on its own far horizon, and by the time I'd reached the inner gate, having crossed a mighty span over an uncountable number of demons, tears were rolling down my cheeks. I felt confused and fought the urge to scream. It seemed my aunt Laila had been right the first time.

I'd made a mistake, stepping back into life before arriving at this forsaken city. It wasn't that I wouldn't fit in. My gray hair was common enough among the citizens, young and old, but I'd forgone the hellish distance at a time when I needed it the most.

Up close, a Pestilent curse stared back from every face, some instances more intent than others. Each person was a number, a screech, a slow count marking their days and distance on a path toward oblivion. Each was being fully consumed for the Emperor and his House. The truth was etched clearly on each heart as the human core eroded beneath its soul, and yet the fact remained hidden from the citizens' minds that existed within their pale shells.

The only reprieve, if one could call it that, was the lack of children. Of the young adults that I encountered, they seemed to be the most affected, haunted as they held tightly to their young lives, not understanding their loss nor having reached the point of letting go. They weren't that much younger than me.

"Sir, welcome back to Qreyl. Can we escort you onward to your home? Sir?" The gate captain held my horse's reins.

I dismounted. "Please show me to Careck's residence."

"Of course. Will Careck be joining you?"

I only stared in response, waiting for the man to withdraw the question. I was suddenly tired, starving. Perhaps this was what Careck was trying to tell me about the need to bring him along. That he could somehow protect me or feed me. Or maybe, he'd have been a useful distraction, keeping my rage at the surface like a coat of rancid armor. I didn't know if my brother had an ounce of sense, but he knew the rules and how to survive within the Damogir's plague-ridden city.

"Careck is dead," I finally replied. "Let's go."

As I cleared the main gateway, avoiding the slow stream of wagons, a shift seemed to occur, severing my connections completely. Qreyl tugged at my mind with distractions like a street urchin or a pickpocket. I could no longer feel the pain of Tumo Storm, and I touched the hilt of *Koki-Ten*, finding a thick layer of fury and pain still banded in place around the demon. Being tied to my family's presence through brood and blood, I was used to the flow of

emotion and energy around me. Suddenly, I was blind, deaf, and numb.

The house steward showed me into an otherwise empty mansion. "Welcome to Qreyl, Blood Master."

The place was as large as the Checkered Flag Manor back in Maidenhall, but the servants were gone for the night. I had my reservations about sleeping within the walls of Qreyl. The plague's hunger seemed to be alive, and the doors of Careck's manor wouldn't keep it out. Still, the past weeks had taken their toll, and the visions of the peoples' faces proved larger and more haunting than my mind could bear in its tired state. The beds were mercifully soft.

The bar was the same, one I'd often visited before, and each time the result was the same. The bar counter had expanded, regrown on another scale to fit the oversized warrior in the middle. On his right sat death incarnate, wearing seductive blood-red lips and glove-tight, black leather armor. To the far left sat a seemingly older being, one hard to pin down with one's eyes.

I stood in my usual silent terror for a moment, waiting for the hellfire to descend upon me once more. It was my way out whenever I made a wrong turn in this dive bar domain. I found the door at the far side of the room. It was another possible escape route and one that the immense warrior could never follow me through if I managed to get that far.

I walked in a shallow arc past the patrons, each deep in their mugs of pungent ale, and skirted my way toward the rustic door. I assumed that it would be unlocked when I got there. As plans go, that was the extent of mine.

"And where do you think you're going?" It was Raven's voice. The infernal assassin purred, "Why don't you join us at the bar? You look thirsty."

Feth.

As I gazed at her face, she did indeed remind me of Rae, making it an offer I couldn't refuse. I sat to her right on a tall stool that wasn't there a moment ago.

"Are you here to return my sword?" The ten-ton warrior seemed a bit glazed over yet fully aware of my presence.

“Who’s asking?” I replied.

“The owner.”

Oh. Exile was a Hell-bound sword, and as far as I knew, it was mine. Still, I was willing to deal, a small trade for a bigger one. “What are you offering for its return?”

By the Gray rules, giving someone a weapon was an agreement of fealty with the giver acknowledging their superior position and intention to protect the receiver. A trade, on the other hand, kept things on the level and eschewed any further obligation. That rule didn’t seem to apply in this barroom tinged with Black, or maybe I had been right about it from the start. It wasn’t a gift. It was a message, and I had one of my own to send.

A drink appeared in front of me, a bottle with an unreadable label. “Drink,” said the elder from the far end of the bar. “You are beyond parched.”

“I don’t drink.”

“We won’t hold that against you. Now, drink,” said the middle-man. He refused to look in my direction, but I could feel his presence. “It’s part of the deal to be struck.”

“What deal?” I said.

The giant, his helm covered in thick, twisted horns, only stared into his glass, waiting. The death-demon leaned against me, gently licking my ear in a familiar gesture.

Before I knew it, I was setting the bottle back down on the bar and had completely forgotten my intricate plan for escape. I tilted my head back and screamed at the top of my lungs, not in pain nor despair, but in joy at the new life running through my veins. A vision of a young man tracking through the foothills of Lockrun came to me as clear as the night I’d walked out of that frontier city’s gate in search of darker prey. His hair was a sandy brown, and his face resembled mine in ways that I’d long forgotten.

I was done sitting. “I need more of that,” I pointed to where the bottle had been a second ago. I moved behind the behemoth, trying to get the massive demon’s attention. “Do we have a deal?”

The warlord turned in his seat and put his black boot through my chest, throwing me backward across the room with a roar, “When I

have my sword!"

The good news, what there was of it, centered upon the door to the tavern and the fact that I hit it squarely with my back, shattering the portal and completing my plan as I crashed on through it. The bad news, not a surprise, was the hellfire waiting for me outside.

Chapter 18

Arenas and Doors

The silence might have bothered me more, but the screaming had stopped, and my vocal cords hadn't snapped under the pressure of another violent night's sleep. The windows were open. A cold morning breeze scouted the room for any signs of life. The sheets was soaked in blood, sweat, and tears, and I may have bitten my tongue sometime during the night.

I crawled out of bed, expecting the worst of it, and felt fine. My fatigue was gone. Scars still covered my torso and limbs, but the unending ache in my left arm had faded, and the Vigil marks on my chest were calm and cool.

The manor house beneath me didn't move, not a creak or a pop as I readied myself for the next stage of the siege. The city's walls had been breached in the initial assault, along with my own, but morale was running high. Hellfire is a motivator of immense proportions. A soft knock on my door arrived as I was buckling on the last vambrace.

"Good morning. I am Galrick, the house steward. May I release the staff from their rooms?" The man's question felt like a formality, asking permission to start the day.

"Certainly," I said. "And why are they being held in their rooms at all?"

"Master Careck has a routine of hunting at night, and good help is hard to find." He might have been commenting on the clear weather for all the concern he seemed to carry about the sadistic practices of the First Fang.

Qreyll, with its tens of thousands of citizens, was a city of diseased sheep, each ripe for the culling. *Feth that*. They were people, humankind, and some, quite possibly, were blood relatives of mine. I'd seen their faces last night, perspiring as they toiled in the dim light of lamps and torches. The evening had been frigid, the work warm and unending. Today's battle would be a terrible conflict in the muted cold light of day. I carried swords, but they wore their faces like shields, and their eyes were like darts of hellfire looking to pierce my skin.

"Sir?"

"Master Galrick, I will have breakfast before I leave for the day. I am new to this city and will require an escort."

"Where would you like to go?"

First off, I had a delivery to make. "To the city's altar."

"Very well. I will alert the staff."

"Master Galrick, Careck is dead. The culling is over."

"I wish it were so." Galrick bowed and led me downstairs to the dining room of the opulent manor.

I couldn't see anything of Careck's in the house, which probably helped it hold its value.

"And what did you mean by that?" I said.

"The Blood Challenge has passed, and four new Claws have ascended. They hunt in a pack, I'm told. Without a Fang to guide them, they've begun—," Galrick suddenly stopped, noticing the look on my face. "My apologies, Blood Master. I should not have complained."

The title *Blood Master* fit for all the wrong reasons and aligned me with a disease. I'd save it for the Damogir.

"Ara. My name is Ara Storm. You will continue to lock in the staff at night, and yes, the hunting will continue until I say otherwise."

I'd spent most of my life as an empath, drawing on the energy of others' emotions, tasting their flavors, and trying to gain some advantage in any situation. My first day in Qreyll was rapidly changing that habit, thwarting me as I tried to discern the moods and motives of those I met. The curse slowly consumed its citizens, beginning with their hearts, leaving everyone coldly blank, almost

undead, with strikingly pale appearances to match.

My aunt Laila had been right to send me away. Raven, too. To look upon the river of severed hearts that flowed down the street without a murmur or a whisper or smile was insufferable. It was a haunting of unimaginable proportions, and I'd only arrived.

I could still feel the chaotic presence of the Emperor's Horde in the basin outside the city's sheer walls. A separate hunger, an unreal emotion, it was a dark smear on the landscape. I'd only glimpsed a small portion of it as I crossed over the bridge to the inner gate. The menagerie of lesser demons gathered in the chasm numbered in the thousands. It circled in a surprisingly unaggressive manner as if the city fed their chaotic existence as much as they fed off the citizen's muted despair.

I hadn't a real plan when I'd arrived, but my mind was filling up rapidly with questions and tasks. I needed to see the demonic altar to make a delivery and figure out how to stem the incoming tide of demons. The Horde outside was big enough, impossibly big. I needed to learn more about the Damogir, find a suitably strong way to get his attention, and begin negotiations in earnest. A midnight hunt seemed like the next move, and I was certainly in the mood for it.

"This is the arena for the Blood Challenge?" I'd lowered myself down onto the grassy pitch from the surrounding sections of seating.

Buran nodded. In his early thirties, he was employed by Galrick as a jack-of-all-trades to help maintain the manor house. He maintained a stoic nature that clashed with the vibrant tattoos on his skin.

The field was more than a hundred yards long and perhaps another sixty wide. Gates swung open at each of the four rounded corners, leading into darkened corridors that ran beneath the rising levels of benches. The turf was stained with recently placed patches of blood and urine. More than a dozen candidates for ascension had met their end within the last fortnight. Most were my blood brothers and sisters.

The arena's structure was immense, able to hold the city's entire

population at once. An altar within an arch was positioned at one end of the field, and though it glowed a sickly red to my sight, it seemed to be rarely, if ever, used. Examining it closely, I couldn't find any scents or tracks of Hellions on the turf around it. A single vase, the size of a bathtub, sat beneath its portal arch, an empty gate to Hell. Curiously, familiar symbols were etched into the stone wall above it.

I didn't draw *Exile* but simply removed its sheath and the buckles from my back. A weapon is never one's friend, especially one imbued with the soul of a fallen demonic Warlord, but the glaive had been a reliable bodyguard on my violent path as Vigil Storm. Its blood-curdling screams would not be missed. I placed the blade in the oversized vase and waited. Nothing happened.

Where was a Hell-knight to explain how these portals worked? Being far too long and heavy for my use, *Do'Roru*, an imbued hellsword, was stowed safely back at Careck's former manor house. A relic from an earlier confrontation, the hellsword had been decidedly easier to capture than many of the Infernal weapons I'd acquired. Most of those, including *Exile*, brought scars along with their story.

Behind me, Buran shuffled.

Not wanting to see the man's face, I folded my arms and remained facing the wall, pondering. "Buran, those symbols tattooed on your skin, what do they mean?"

"They're wards of protection to block the Damogir's curse."

"Where did you get them?"

"A witch."

I pointed at the wall above the urn. "What do those symbols mean? They seem familiar."

"They are from a time before the plague took hold of the city and speak of its undying spirit," he explained. "They translate to 'the Summer Wind blows eternal,' or some such feth."

Feth.

The words had aged into the height of irony in a city of eternal winter. But I was the Wind Catcher, and more than anything, I could turn any wind. I stepped forward and placed my hand on the vase, whispering a destination through the Veil. I gently pushed my own

wind upon it as I did, releasing a small surge of energy. *Exile* faded and was gone, borrowed and then returned.

I might miss the blade but felt better for its loss, knowing the sword's presence had been as much a burden as a boon to carry across my back. The weapon's appetite for blood and the Black rage it hoarded was certainly an unhealthy companion for an impressionable teen such as I. Where were my parents when I needed their guidance?

Feth them and the death-demon they'd ridden in upon. One had made me, and the other had thrown me away, while the death-demon had been an infernal body snatcher with no regard for my well-being.

"Discarded," Koki-Ten hissed. It had awakened at the altar as promised. *"Perhaps you'd like to discard me too?"*

"You want to return to Hell? You're not even close to being whole."

"I will be reborn on the Veil's other side. Free of the contract, I will heal and return to form as the alpha of my brood."

It wasn't that easy. A deal was a deal, and alpha or not, an Infernal contract didn't end by running away. By sending it through the Veil, I'd only be freeing a dangerous enemy for my future self. I could do better than that.

"I'm done here," I said to Buran. "Any chance that I could meet your witch?"

"She's not mine. You'll have to ask the boss."

I didn't react to the word 'boss' but certainly felt intrigued. "Any chance we could meet with the boss today?"

Buran gave me a long look and nodded, "Galrick won't need me until lockdown. Let's go get something to eat."

Nearby stood the Damogir's Hold, its curtain wall a looming work of art. It dominated the city's center with ornate towers, long arms, and deeply shadowed windows. It seemed entirely unguarded when viewed from the outside yet screamed in my mind whenever I looked directly at it. A wide plaza had formed a desolate ring around it, a no man's land where neither citizen nor guard trod. Beyond the plaza, abandoned businesses and abodes faced the empty cobbles. The Infernal plague's source lived behind the stronghold's high walls, and we didn't tarry long beneath their stare.

Buran took me on a tour of the city as we zig-zagged our way toward the main gate and what must be considered the Warehouse District. Qreyll's circular outer wall enclosed a densely packed urban setting. Another circle enclosed the Damogir's Hold, which dominated the city center and sent long, elevated arms to each of the four cardinal points on the outer wall, like a four-pointed star. Each arm ended in a suitably tall tower that was only dwarfed by the massive central structure in size. As such, the city was divided into four quadrants with wide gates running beneath each arm, doing thankfully little to stem the flow of its citizens between them.

The unending wagon train circled through the Warehouse quadrant on the city's southeast side before heading back out through the main gate. Smaller carts came and went from the other sectors of the city, the Market District on the northeast, the Military and Arena District, mostly vacant, to the northwest, and the Residential zone to the southwest. Beneath the city, other zones existed, maintaining functions critical to Qreyll's survival, and I couldn't shake the feeling that the capital operated more like a farm than anything else.

"The Damogir keeps us well fed, and the mines provide all the wealth that he needs to do so," said Buran.

I was skeptical of that remark until we'd entered the Gray Lion Pub. There were men stationed on its roof and on the building across the street, all carrying crossbows. It reminded me of home. Thankfully, we didn't tarry outside.

We were met at the door by a massive, tattooed fellow, six more crossbows, and the overwhelming scent of spicy, grilled beef. This last item distracted me the most, harboring a raft of flavor in a city where none seemed to exist.

A deep voice boomed from the shadows near the foyer, "Buran, what the Hell have you done, bringing *him* here?"

Arrayed around a hefty, tattooed individual, six crossbows pressed the shoulders of stern-looking guards. That the six bows hadn't already fired left me wondering at the sincerity of the boss's remark and my ability to sense any threats in this city. It took all my concentration to ferret out the unease that I'd caused in the pub.

I moved my hand slowly, forgoing all aggressive gestures, and pressed down on the hilt of *Koki-Ten*. "I'm not here to make trouble. I only want to talk."

"Give me your dagger," the burly boss held out his hand with only the slightest tremble.

I slid the fang halfway out of its sheath, showing them enough of the demon tooth. I smiled, trying to minimize the threat, "Are you sure that you want this?"

I spun sideways, leaning back at the same time as a steel bolt smacked into the door behind me. I kept my hand on *Koki-Ten*, pushing it back into its sleeve. I pointed at the left-most bowman, a man with a supremely shocked look on his face, and tried to defuse the situation, "Send him outside."

The boss seemed to consider the order, paired with my lack of a forceful response and his dwindling life expectancy. "Floyd, get the feth out, now. Use the backdoor."

Ben Heck, my former head of security, might have killed the man, Floyd, or he might have paid him a reward. Let's say it had been a while since we'd enjoyed each other's company.

What annoyed me most about the situation was the lack of any feeling in the pub room before the guard decided to shoot. Only *Koki-Ten's* awareness had warned me and guided me out of the bolt's path. No matter our differences, there was an understanding in place, one sealed with my blood. While the demon couldn't escape the Infernal contract, it would still honor ours, placing its bet on the gray horse to win.

Boldly turning my back on the crew, I carefully reached for the spent steel bolt, tugging it from the thick, hardwood door. It smelled clean. Inside the poisoned jewel that was Qreyll, the enforcers didn't risk using more caustic substances.

I spoke in my most calm manner, "I'm only here to make introductions and meet the local witch. I can see that Buran trusts your watchers as well as your preparedness for any threat."

Most of the room's occupants had visible tattoos, but none were as extensive as Buran's, and nothing came close to the boss's dark designs. I couldn't discern the meanings of the various symbols, but

they still spoke to me with their relative quantity. I tossed the bent bolt to the burly doorman, aiming for a hole in his ink-filled armor.

“What the feth is this?” he said in surprise.

I was being rash, bartering with complete strangers, but I needed to move away from further thoughts of violence. “An offer for a dying city, be it above or below the surface.”

“And what good would this do me?”

“Do your businesses stay open at night? Do your watchers have any effect on the darkness that plagues your House? Have your crossbows even scratched the hide of a single hunter that prowls your streets?”

The dent in the door behind me had answered all of those questions and more.

“What does that have to do with anything?” The boss was pissed yet playing coy, drawing out the puzzle before him.

I continued, “How can you run your operations safely, day and night, without them?” It wasn’t a threat, but the boss seemed to take it as such.

In Colivar, Gray Houses were willing to make deals with a Gray Prince, but in Niantia, nobody but the Damogir wanted to make a deal with the devil that walked through their door.

“Nobody messes with me. I control the ink that shields us from the curse.” He didn’t mention the witch, only the ink, and he wore plenty of it.

“*What’s in the ink?*” I thought.

“*It smells like a mix of blood from a demon and the Damogir’s bloodline,*” replied Koki-Ten.

“*Like the doses of Black?*”

“*No, those come from the Get. The doses of Black contain imprints of my soul and offer threads of control. The boss’s ink is a mix of blood from a lesser demon and a magata. It is a weak alternative that partially hides the wearer from the curse. They must have an accomplished witch to have thought of it. The Damogir will be interested in finding her.*”

Having access to a magata, an unchained offspring of the Emperor, seemed easy enough. Hell, they could simply steal the

body of a loser from the Blood Challenge and butcher it while it was still fresh. The more difficult collection would be to capture and bleed one of the Horde. While a ready supply strolled through the caldera outside the city walls, I didn't see any good way of harnessing a demon without having to kill it. Once it was dead, its soul would flee back through the Veil, and its body would disintegrate in a matter of hours.

"You said it was weak?"

"Compared to my soul, yes, and the binding is crude."

Alpha *Kjaira* are a proud bunch when it comes to weaving together the souls of their broods. If there was one thing I knew, it was a crude connection. I held out my hand to the boss, my back against the stout, hardwood door that he guarded.

"I'm Ara Storm. I'm new in town and looking for a decent meal."

"Rez Kepler," the man shook my hand, giving me a far closer view of his existence.

The boss's inner being wasn't at all pretty. Living on the border of chaos and despair for that many years would do that. He'd been out in the winter wind too long, and the plague's frost was biting away at the edges of everything. The view was made worse by his overlying web of Infernal ink.

Koki-Ten hadn't lied. The ink-stained strands of protection were weak, an overused bandage at best, bleeding off their own form of poison. They seemed to vaporize as I traced them with my mind, and the boss shifted under the icy draft I'd created. He knew something was wrong.

With the hard scrutiny of an experienced bouncer, the boss had been doing his own observations, trying to nail me down before allowing me further into his domain. "How old are you, anyway?"

"I'll be twenty this summer. Why?" I replied.

As we dropped the handshake, Kepler's eyes seemed to retreat, his disappointment showing like an embarrassing rash. My rude, gray hair clashed with my young age, calling me a fraud. It's all that he had to go on, but he would learn the truth soon enough.

"Feth. We thought you might be the real deal, not some kid without a clue or the good sense to stay away. Ink or no ink, you've

got 'crazy fether' written all over you." Kepler turned to Buran, "Take him out of here, and don't waste my time again."

From the far side of the common room, I could feel the merest inkling of fear.

"My bolt," I held out my hand for the slightly bent piece of steel. "I will remember your words."

Chapter 19

City Hunter

In my quest to comprehend the Damogir and overcome the plague, I meant to leave nothing in this city unturned. I hadn't met the witch, only their clever inkwork. Maybe we'd run into each other sometime, but tonight, as Wind Catcher, I had a family reunion planned.

Sticking to the evening ritual, the manor house's staff had locked its doors and barred its windows for all the good it would do. I was still here.

"I know that you can call them," I said, tapping my dagger on the dinner table.

"You haven't gained control of my brood bonds. You can drag me around with your blood chains, but not my brethren."

"I'm offering you a chance to recapture more of your soul."

"So that you can force it to your will? What use is that? As the contract holder, the Damogir still holds the dominant position."

Never take what you can't hold.

The Damogir had to know this rule better than most, and he'd held his realm in a state of terror for decades, leveraging the alpha *Kjaira's* soul to keep the minds of the citizens in line. In the end, everyone suffered, and the contract continued, its reins gripped by the real Emperor, the Pestilent Prince Kasaval. I was the usurper, taking by force what the devious minds had wrought with certitude. I had chained their Black weapon and was looking forward to hearing their complaint. It would allow me to voice a few of my own.

I'd dealt with an alpha *Kjaira* before and barely survived the

outcome of the deal I'd struck. Still, with four Claws on the horizon, I needed an edge. The Claws moved in a pack and coordinated their movements as one. I'd never get a chance to surprise them. I was fairly sure that I could overcome two at once, but fighting four would be suicide.

"Where are they now?" I said.

"They are running east toward the Warehouse District, hunting a witch," the demon hissed, offering a weak dose of laughter.

"How do they know about the witch?"

"You hate witches almost as much as the Damogir."

While likely true, it wasn't part of my meager plan, nor was it an answer to my question.

"Call them, now," I commanded.

Sensing my resolve, *Koki-Ten* stirred within her cage. *"Your desperation hastens your decay."*

"My desperation matches your own. Does it not?"

It conceded, *"Your chains are only a small part of my cage."*

I had bound the demon's soul with my blood, layers of Fury, and the curse of its victims. It could only move with my permission, no matter what the Damogir and his Infernal contract had to say.

"What's it worth to you to be freed entirely?" I countered.

Having a mind that could perceive and react to any threat in an instant, *Koki-Ten* offered a telling response, one that seemed to take an eternity to emerge, *"You know that answer better than anyone, and the cost."*

I did, and demon or not, we both suffered for the binding I wielded in my defense. For the sake of our souls, there was nothing small about the deal that we needed to make.

"Cooperate tonight, and I will free you from the contract and send you home." It was an offer that the demon couldn't refuse.

"By your House, do you swear?"

"By both Houses, if you will honor them with a truce when I deliver my side of the deal."

"The Claws' pack has been called. They are headed this way. Being bound by the contract, I cannot fight them."

Madd-Jak was eager enough and ready to play. I'd place my bets

on the beast ready within my ring.

“Merely hide me as you lead them on, and we will give them the hunt of their lives.”

I ran from the manor house, circling onto an avenue angling away from the pack of assassins, drawing them farther from those most vulnerable. The wagon trains still rolled through the city, as did plenty of gate guards and random sleepless citizens. *Koki-Ten* alternated between cloaking me and calling to the Claws as we raced in a game of badger and hound.

I knew they were there, only a few blocks behind us. Their existence wasn't muted like the rest of the city, and I could feel the growing intensity of their desire for revenge. *Koki-Ten* hadn't only called them but had painted a target on my back. For once, inside the walls of Qreyll, I had a source of rage to stoke and pull upon. The Claws' caustic minds became such that anyone within a block of their footsteps had to feel their dark power and shudder at the keenly violent thoughts that ran through them. If anyone failed to heed that warning, well, they didn't deserve to survive.

Having a path mapped out and a final destination in mind, I worked to divide the four hunters. I would be cutting it close, but close was infinitely better than nothing. With the assassins focused on me, I circled back and led them deep into the almost abandoned Military District, past block-sized barracks, buildings, and training fields. I halted on the far corner of one building, cloaked by *Koki-Ten*, listening to the Claws' approach barely a block away.

The pack split up, one to each side of the edifice and two running over the roof, shrieking loudly as they tried to spook me from cover. As I sprinted away, *Koki-Ten* shrieked with hideous laughter, offering a frenzied taunt to its siblings. The four Claws howled and melted back into a single pack, dashing a block or two behind us. The alpha was certainly enjoying the hunt, cloaking me before every random turn and knowing when to coax its broodkin on.

Using the Damogir's Hold as a beacon, I worked my way back toward the city center and angled for the massive stadium of the Blood Challenge. Cloaked again, I reached my target, rounding the far side of the structure, and found a flight of stairs down into its

underground labyrinth. Again, I hesitated, sensing the pack's reaction and their growing frustration at the night's elusive prey. The four Claws split into two, covering both sides of the arena in their attempt to hem me in.

Leaping down the stairs into an utterly dark passage, I followed the residual scents of the Blood Challenge's earlier victims until I'd emerged onto the battlefield. A nudge of *Koki-Ten* was all it took to call out my own challenge, and before long, I stood in the center of the pitch as a pair of embers glowed at each of the four corner gates. By blocking all the exits, the Claws had created a rectangular trap.

Koki-Ten had fallen silent as I ended my prey-like impersonation, and I reached out through the blood curse to judge each hunter's determination. The chaining of a demon and a human heart required the most alien of magic and the strongest of human souls. Examining the results, I found the stoutest of the four *Get* and immediately charged its gate. The hulking Claw reminded me of Kestrel Roush by his size and demeanor, but thankfully not his face.

Perhaps assuming that I was trying to escape, the fiend hesitated, and instead of counter charging toward the center, it drew its weapons, a claw-dagger and a short sword, and defended the mouth of its exit. It screamed out its challenge, "Magata!"

That was their second mistake, thinking that I was *magata* where a fight was concerned. Its brethren bolted forward across the pitch to join the fight.

With the speed and power of *Madd-Jak*, the soul of a *Kjaira* enforcer, my fang-dagger arrived first, piercing the left eye of the most dominant Claw, throwing him back into the tunnel he guarded. In mere seconds, the next arrived, catching Second Fang in its ear as I spun to avoid its incoming blade. The forehead of the third and the neck of the fourth arrived only a few heartbeats apart, but it was enough.

Each hunter's lack of hesitation made them more dangerous and yet perfectly predictable in their aggressive maneuvers. The last three had reached my corner conveniently spaced apart due to the varying distances across the rectangular field, giving me the briefest shot at each before the next arrived. I hadn't wasted a second, not even

when faced with the last, putting the newly ascended Claws out of their misery and ending the torturous grip that their faces had on my mind. For someone that could more than match their strength and quickness, I had no defense for the blood we shared. Each Claw's death left me feeling more hollow and more like a true child of Qreyl.

These were the Guard of the Black Prince, not the Gray, and even in their destruction, the four souls remained exiled from the ranks of humankind. *Koki-Ten* gained the shards of her being, reclaiming those and bolstering her strength with the fiercest bloodline that our world had to offer. That the death-demon's soul had attained the majority of its original essence was a fact to ponder as I examined the bodies. With my survival and a new deal in place, the demon had become silent, sullen, still locked within its cage.

The *Get of the Damogir* wore armor similar to mine, with steel-clad vambraces and chain-backed leather complementing their claw-daggers and short swords. The quality was excellent. Along with four unimbued Claw blades, I gathered up one overly ornate yet sturdy short sword and an underused vambrace. The Claws' reign of terror had been short, yet each blade they'd wielded wore another's blood, and only in death did I consider them my brothers. I arranged their bodies side by side on the arena floor and mourned them from a distance, feeling as if I knew them better than myself.

A careful knock on my bedroom door matched the previous day's start.

"Come in, Master Galrick."

I was almost dressed and still pondering my next step in deciphering the puzzle that was Qreyl. Messages of introduction had been sent, and I was waiting on the responses to arrive.

"Good morning, Blood Master. I am Steward Galrick. May I release the staff from their rooms?"

"Galrick, didn't we already introduce ourselves yesterday morning and the night before that?"

"As you say," he replied. "I don't always know to whom I am speaking. You seem different than when we last spoke."

My night had been relatively free of hellfire and blood-curdling

screams. I assumed that everyone in the house had benefited. "You are speaking to Ara Storm, same as yesterday. Please release the staff from their rooms."

"Master Storm, if I may ask, how was your hunting last night?"

Galrick was only being polite, but the question was odd in its casual tone. *How was the weather last night? Fine, thank you.*

"I found myself being hunted for a time."

Galrick nodded, solemn in his gaze, as if he were offering absolution instead of food. "Breakfast, Sir?"

"Please, and plenty of coffee if you've got any. I'm planning on having an exceedingly busy day." I buckled on my fang-dagger, feeling unhindered by the lack of life around me, and tried to come up with a better answer as to how the night had gone.

As planned? Perhaps.

Being bound within the Emperor's contract, *Koki-Ten* hadn't aided me in the slaughter of the four Claws but had still collected its soul shards as a reward. Something more was surely owed to level that deal. I placed my hand on the dagger's hilt, nudging the demon and not getting any response. It couldn't cause me harm, but perhaps it could ignore me. The deal we cut last night would only go into effect once I'd delivered its freedom. Perhaps, it had nothing more to say on the matter.

Being the brood-makers of Hell, Alpha *Kjaira* demons had an ability far beyond any being of unreality to weave souls. That it could capture and consume the souls of human assassins wasn't a trick that I wished to learn.

In my desperation, I had chained the alpha death-demon before stuffing it in its Black box, leaving me a hook that I could yank to move it or get its attention. I only used this in dire situations when I didn't have another option. In fighting the Infernal Domain, the ends always justified the means, but the cost to my heart and soul was always beyond measure when I did.

Last night had gone as planned. I'd conquered the last of the *Get of the Damogir*, hopefully providing some room to maneuver in Qreyl, and after consuming a day's share of coffee, I was ready to face the Infernal plague in all its forms. Ok, I may have been way too

optimistic, but the coffee was surprisingly good, offering a kick when I needed it most.

As I was finishing up, Buran entered the dining room, “Master Storm, you have visitors waiting in the den.”

Expected visitors are the best kind. Naked ones are even better. The shock of it all was that, for once, I didn’t have an urge to kill the witch. Several daggers of introduction flew between the two of us as I stepped into the comfortable, dimly lit den, and we rocked each other backward with our regard. To one side, Buran stood with Rez Kepler, letting the obvious confrontation play out before getting down to business.

The witch, a gaunt woman in her late twenties, was pressed up against the far wall beside a cold fireplace, covering her eyes. That gesture may have saved us both. With the ink painted upon her skin, she was more curse than human and a relief to my mind in many familiar ways. Her eyes were a mirror of mine in one extremely awkward shade of gray, and I could sense a blood sister beneath them as they tried to comprehend the folly of Rez Kepler.

“Firefanged, have mercy,” she whispered.

“*Magata*,” *Koki-Ten* spat back.

We all heard it. It was as concise an introduction as I’d ever experienced, and it jolted the room like the slamming of a door. The witch’s fear broke through the surface of her mind, and tears escaped her fingers as if appearing out of thin air, a work of true magic in a city of dead and dying hearts.

I tasted her panic and reached out through our blood’s common bond. I knew her intimately before I ever knew her name. Before I realized it, I was touching her cheek, tracing the wet tracks to her chin in my fascination.

She wore a web of dead spiders across the chasm between her soul and her mind, each poisoned to death by the Black in small doses until none were left to replace the last. Still fairly young, she carried the heart of one considerably older, the attendee of far too many wakes with never a wedding in between. The woman’s heart pounded out its rhythm for no one, not even herself.

I searched for the ice that I was sure must be hiding beneath it all,

finding only emptiness instead. I sought to change all that by pulling her out into the open and restoring whatever had been taken. She wasn't given a choice.

With a flick of Fury, I tore away the rancid power of her ink, ripping it off as if a shirt from a desperate lover, leaving her bare and paralyzed. Drawing my dagger, I pressed it carefully into her earlobe, making only the slightest prick to draw blood, and I pulled what Black I could from the witch's soul along with layers of anger and despair. Mixing it with my own, I placed yet another layer on the death-demon's impregnable cage.

"End the magata," Koki-Ten seemed miffed by its poor reward, and its alien screams visited everyone in the house.

Buran hid his unease. Kepler, not so much. Our introductions would continue until the boss was certain of his loyalty and our negotiations were complete.

While the witch was still distracted, I sliced my thumb and pinched her ear with it, allowing our blood to mix, the old guard marching forth to decide the battle's final outcome, crushing the disease that had split her heart almost in two. To me, there was never any choice when it came to the future of my bloodline. It was the clearest path for me to follow, and her body wouldn't fit beside the other four.

My work complete, I took a step back. "I'm Ara, and you are?"

She grabbed my wrist. "How—how dare you?" she seethed or at least tried to. Her distractions were many as her reality and her mind spun into something new.

I leaned in close and rubbed my thumb against the inside of her shirt's collar, patting it gently into place. In doing so, I offered another crude yet effective blood connection to protect her, replacing the vile ink with an antidote of my own making.

"I could ask you the same, but I'd prefer to know your name first."

"Dania," she shot back. "Dania the Leper." Her grip on my wrist hardened into a manacle as I felt a sudden urge to back away. The witch smiled, noting my discomfort and her ability to throw me off balance.

Buran burst out laughing, drawing my attention, and Dania's fist

burst out, catching my jaw. Stripped of her curses, the witch wasn't entirely powerless after all.

I was still holding the fang-dagger in my left hand, and I moved to sheathe it before things escalated further.

Dania shrieked, "You stabbed me with that?"

"What? This?" I waved the wicked fang in her face, giving her a dose of her own medicine. "I think it likes you. It has a thing for magata and won't shut up about ending them."

The dagger might as well have been a Hell-spider on a leash the way it chased her back into the corner of the room.

The woman's blondish-brown hair was tightly braided in a long strand down her back. Her leather vest was covered in pockets, and one of her knuckles was turning a reddish-blue to match her face.

"Who the feth are you?" she cried, looking over my shoulder at the boss for protection.

I truly hadn't intended on ruining her day, but the conversation between Dania and me had ended with a woefully shaken witch.

Kepler wasn't any help. His tattoos had faded to almost nothing, and he was too afraid to speak.

"I'm *magata*, just like you," I said.

'*Firefanged*' had escaped her unguarded lips. "Liar. You aren't like me. You aren't like anyone here. Not even close."

"And you're a witch." Not a great comeback, but it's all I had at the moment. My jaw still squawked loudly with pain and ringing in my left ear.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

I was enjoying the woman's simmering rage. It was like standing beside a warm fire in a field of snow. I explained my concern, "The *Get of the Dam* were hunting for a witch in the Warehouse District last night. Know whom they might have been after?"

I put *Koki-Ten* away before the demon decided to comment again, and I counted to ten, letting Dania's unshackled mind sort the situation.

"I saw the ascension of the *Get*. You're cloaked in their essence."

I didn't like that idea at all, and I nudged *Koki-Ten*, "*What did she mean by that?*"

"The signature of the gift you were given, the imprint of the pack still fades."

Kepler took that moment to cough as if we'd forgotten he was there. He was lost and yet more afraid of being ignored. That was his call.

Dania interrupted my unseen conversation, "What did you do to Kepler?"

"I offered him an introduction. He declined. I left."

"Some might not think so," she looked carefully at Kepler as she spoke. "His ink has faded, and he told me that there's some sort of witch running about acting like a *Get of the Damogir*."

Keeping my attention on Dania, I ignored the heated accusations between Kepler and Buran. The pair ran the undercity, the Gray somehow thriving beneath the Black. In Qreyl, the city's control was exceedingly more subtle, keeping all the powers safely ensconced on their various thrones. If anyone arrived to upset the balance, well, that person's days were surely numbered.

"I'm not a witch. I'm not like you. Not even close," I replied in my driest tone. Women dig that sort of thing, but witches? Who knew?

"Tell me who you are again and what you did to me. Go slowly so even Kepler can understand it. He's not the brightest of the Gray."

"I did the same things to you that I do to all of my siblings. I stab them. Sometimes to death, sometimes not. Either way, the curse of the Black is destroyed." I knew her secret and had used it to help her.

"And my ink?" Dania's designs had also begun fading from her pale skin.

"You mean that poison? Where did you get the blood of a demon?"

"I know folks in the mines. They sneak it out of the crypts for me."

"The crypts? Like where they bury people?"

"Yes, only these are located in caverns deep under the city, not far from the mines. If you haven't noticed by now, Qreyl doesn't have any cemeteries."

I hadn't noticed. Hadn't even thought to look. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Qreyl only has one demonic portal. It's located in the arena and

hasn't been used in years."

I could do the math. "That's not possible. The Horde that surrounds this city is huge. I haven't even had a chance to try and count it."

"You don't have to. Just ask the magistrate in charge of the Damogir's crypts. He'll know how many citizens they've interred in the past few decades, and that'll give you an accurate count."

"The Infernal plague," I coughed, wishing I had a wall to lean on or my own fireplace to jump into.

FETH.

She responded, "Yes, the Infernal plague. It creates lesser demons directly from the citizens of Qreyl as it consumes their hearts. Or didn't you know that?"

Didn't I know that the city of Qreyl was one giant, Infernal altar? No, I couldn't even fathom it. I'd seen the plague's visions. They were pure chaos, more mentally damaging than informative, and they only showed the results, not the process.

Feth.

I swallowed this morning's breakfast a second time, counting in my head and trying to breathe, searching for a way to proceed. I'd once been prepared for this, but now, I wasn't so sure. A fleeting vision of a one-armed girl flashed through my mind. A girl that thought of me as a prince, not a demon.

Which is it? Perhaps, it depends on which bloodline is making a guess.

The room waited in silence, allowing me to make up my mind.

"Dania, that's the reason I'm standing here talking with you now. I need to know more about the Damogir and the Infernal plague if I am going to be able to end them."

"End them? Aren't you one of them?"

A second punch would have been more polite.

"That's a fair question. And unlike the *Get*, I am not one of them. I already told you, I'm *magata*."

"Only in your heart. That makes you one of us. But you carry a Black power that rivals the Damogir."

"How do you forgive that?" I said. "The severing of your heart?"

“Forgiveness loses all meaning in this situation. Only survival counts until one day you are either gone or something changes without explanation.”

“And when that happens? When reality changes, what do you do?”

She struggled to decipher the meaning of my words. “You acknowledge the miracle, and then you find out how truly gone you are. Not everyone will survive the revelation. You might still be here, or you might find yourself marching with the Horde in the caldera outside.”

Not all witches were evil. Some were only stuck too tightly to their reality.

“Why didn’t you tell Kepler who I was? You saw me yesterday at the pub.”

“Kepler is more of a bouncer than a boss. I figured we’d both learn the truth soon enough, or we’d be dead. I’m still wondering which it will be.”

“Dania, I’d say that you have an uncommonly fatal outlook on life, but I’ve only been here two days, and by the looks of things, you’re one of the more optimistic citizens of Qreyl.”

She looked worried. “What will you do to Kepler?”

The boss had shrunk in my eyes, his bulk taking on a less than formidable sheen. “Should I spare him? I’m sure that others can replace him when the time comes.”

Kepler woke up to my overt threat and again chose his words poorly, “Now you wait a second. This is my city—.”

My hand found his throat, finally making a solid connection to the man’s mind. “This is MY city. If you’re smart, you’ll figure out a way to remain a useful part of it. If not, you can forget about ever regaining your protection from the plague.”

“Dania—,” he gasped.

“Dania the Gray is my sister, and she rules the undercity until I say otherwise. Let it be known. Her mind has been freed from the curse, and she alone remains under my protection.”

“You stole my ink.”

“It was never your ink. I offered you a place in my domain, and

you refused in a most unseemly manner. By the Gray rules, there is a price to be paid for your blind refusal of a fair offer.”

“By what right do you do this?” He pleaded. The man was nothing without a brace of bows behind him.

“By my right as the Gray Prince of Niantia. While you are treading water, I will be draining the pond. If you don’t believe me, I’ve got the remains of four brothers that are eager to meet you.”

Chapter 20

Dania the Gray

I was still shocked at the witch's earlier revelation. "Why doesn't everyone leave?"

"The plague stifles our hearts and enslaves our minds, keeping everyone in place. Very few are allowed to work underground in the crypts or mines or outside the gates where the curse's presence weakens. And besides, where would we go? You've seen the *Get of the Damogir* and the Horde waiting outside. How far would one have to run to escape either of those?"

I didn't like any of Dania's answers, let alone any of the questions she raised, as we took the long walk back to the Warehouse District with Kepler and Buran. I'd shown them my bona fides in the form of four claw-daggers, all newfound relics of *Koki-Ten*, and made clear the consequences of loaded crossbows anywhere within my sight. Buran was named as second to Dania. Rez Kepler would act as a well-fed enforcer and nothing more. If he remained in my good graces, he might be granted a reprieve when it came to a new patch of ink.

I finally replied, "The *Get of the Damogir* didn't escape either."

I had no answer for the larger option, not yet anyway, but I was going to find out more about the plague. My next step would be a tour of Qreyl's undercity. Dania was on the hook to make the trek an informative one.

A wavering beacon in my eyes, Dania continued to struggle, "Why does everything here suddenly seem so faded and bleak. I feel like wailing for the world around me."

She trembled. As her ink disappeared, Dania's heart and soul were slowly waking up to the eradication of the curses she'd carried and the blood bond connection that slowly healed her. She was a fortress of one in a city of many thousands, and I hadn't offered her any choice in the matter.

What would the city's citizens say if I offered them all the same choice? Would they have a sane enough mind to respond? Could they leave and return?

"It must be the leprosy," I murmured, lost in my thoughts.

Dania smacked my shoulder and shook out her already bruised hand.

"Next time, just stab me. That's what my wife does." I examined the witch's knuckles. Her bones were easily apparent beneath her nearly translucent flesh, and it didn't look like anything was broken.

"You have a wife?" There was a hint of sympathy in Dania's voice, but for whom, I couldn't say.

"Her name is Raven." The name burned my tongue as I said it. I may have growled as I turned my gaze downward. "She is the daughter of Queen Tiasa and was hunted by the *Get of the Damogir*."

"If she's still your spouse, I'd say that the *Get* got more than they bargained for."

"I'm still not sure of their true intentions when they ambushed our company. We collected five relics that day and burned their bodies beside the road."

"So, this wasn't the first time that you faced the Damogir's pack?"

"My first time alone, that's for sure, though I'd faced other *Kjaira* before. Still, if you happen to meet the owner of a claw of *Koki-Ten*, be sure to treat them as family, for that is what they will be to me."

"Family doesn't exist in Qreyl. Not anymore. It was outlawed within the walls of the city as an affront to the Damogir. All marriages have been banned, which is redundant considering no one can feel that strongly for another in any way."

"You felt strongly enough about me to almost break your hand. That's progress, isn't it?"

"I still don't know what you did to me. At the moment, I'm so scared I want to puke," she said. "You've taken away my blindness,

the curse that plagues us all, and I'm unable to cope with what I see."

"Outside of Qreyl, there exist thousands of Nantines that suffer a similar harsh view of life. The realm is in ruin, and yet it still survives."

"I'm not talking about those living elsewhere. I'm talking about you and me. How do you survive each day and not regret it?"

"Someone once told me that life isn't about regret. It's about forgiveness. How do we survive when so many haven't?"

Dania remained lost in her new reality. "How?"

"Every moment of our existence is about forgiveness; every breath we take and step along our path must let go of the one before it, or life itself will become a curse."

A curse was something she knew dearly, and I hoped my words made sense to her.

"Are you going to kill Rez Kepler?"

"Only if I get the slightest hint that he's going to get in the way of my next step, whatever that might be," I spoke loudly enough for Buran and Kepler to hear me clearly. "I've killed witches, bosses, and brothers for a chance to end the plague of Qreyl. I won't let a bouncer get in my way."

"Where will you start?"

"I already have. You saw the Claws' daggers. Killing the Claws took another sizable chunk of the *Kjaira's* soul away from the Damogir, and that should spark a response. In the meantime, I need to learn more about the plague and the city."

"I doubt you'll be able to kill him like you did the Claws."

"Why not?"

"The Damogir that attended the recent Blood Challenge looked different and a whole lot younger than the man at the event that occurred the previous year. I don't think he's bound by the destruction of his body."

If *Koki-Ten* could move from victim to victim, I wouldn't doubt that the contract holder and the Emperor could do the same.

"What did he look like?" I said.

"He looked like you. He had the same eyes anyway."

"Maybe his bloodline is included in the contract. It certainly

carries a curse all its own." I stopped there, unsure of the implications.

"It calls to the Black," said Dania. "It's an imprint suited for Infernal souls, not those of humans."

"Are we human?"

Dania sighed, "I wish I had a silver mark for every time I'd asked myself that same question. Twisted as it is, our blood is still red, not black like the *Get's*."

My blood was red, too. Impossibly so. I shuddered as another facet came to mind. "The curse lives on in the children. The bloodline extends beyond a single generation."

"Perhaps. What have you seen?"

"In Colivar, on the border with the Realm of Fugaku, there was a clan of Heretics that sought the power of Pestilence. Their blood was twisted, and their children carried what they called 'the gifts of the Emperor.' In the end, they didn't survive, but one."

"But one?"

As Dania asked the simple question, my mind spun in its frantic need to lock distant doors. We swam in the plague, awash in a cityscape of conscious despair, and I prayed that the curse couldn't find its way out through my many profound connections.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

"No, but as a citizen of Qreyl, I'll fit right in."

Outside the city, the Horde circled and fed, absorbing the energy of everything within. My walls blocked their pull, protecting only two souls at the moment. How many more could I spare? And for how long?

"Ara, let's take a tour of the city's underground. The effect of the blood curse seems to be more muted there. Buran can lead the way and make the introductions. It will be good practice for him."

"Sorry, Dania. A few weeks ago, things changed in the crypt. We don't dare go down there anymore." The foreman of Qreyl's deepest mine seemed sincere in his assessment of the situation. He wore a small tattoo on his left brow, painted with a familiar ink.

"What happened?"

“They had to replace the entire crew that ran the crypt. Instead of finding their way out into the caldera, the demons had begun roaming inward and attacking the workers. They killed dozens before the inner tunnels were sufficiently blocked.”

“Do they still take the city’s dead?” The look on Dania’s face told me the consequences if they didn’t. The nightmare was bad enough without random demons appearing within the walls.

“We had to cut a new tunnel into the crypt cavern, one that connects high on the ceiling. Now, the crypt workers merely dump the bodies in, followed by a barrel of oil, if they have it, to incinerate them. The demons that emerge have nowhere to go but outside to join the rest.”

“Are the mines and the reservoir safe?” said Dania.

“So far, but we don’t know what we’ll do if one of those ant-demons decides to dig its own way out.”

“And don’t forget the spiders,” I said. “They thrive on the ceilings of caves.”

Dania looked at me and the dagger strapped across my chest, “You don’t have anything larger that you could use?”

I’d given away my most lethal weapon, perhaps the one I’d need to commandeer the Horde. It was owed, and I’d been promised plenty in return. Ant-demons were the size of cattle and relatively slow, but it would take dozens of strikes with a dagger to bring one down.

“There must be a few decent axes available,” I replied. “What do you pull from the mines?”

“Diamonds in all colors, shapes, and sizes. We hand them over to the gem-cutters, and they pass on the final product to the customs agents at the outer gate. The Damogir mandates the trade of the gems to feed the city.”

It was an enormous concentration of wealth and a critical process in the city’s survival.

“Who oversees the flow? Who makes sure that it isn’t disrupted?” I might have been speaking gibberish to the foreman based on the scared look that I got.

“Don’t you?” he replied. “The *Get* have always watched over

everything and made it clear about the price of failure.”

I wondered what would happen to the life-sustaining flow of goods in Qreyl once it became widely known that the *Get of the Damogir* had ceased to exist. I nodded to the foreman as Dania steered me away. The gem-cutters would be our next stop.

“The Damogir’s concern is amazing; he treats his citizens like cattle, keeping them well-fed for their eventual slaughter,” I whispered.

“We’re not the only ones that realize that, but there’s little anyone can do to end it.”

“I’m not suggesting that we end it. At least not yet. The city will starve without the enforced trade.”

“The people are indentured servants, and we literally pay with our lives.”

“Dania, do you have any family left?”

“Sure, and he’s the bastard that built this city of nightmares.”

“Besides our beloved father, I mean.”

“I had a younger sister. She didn’t survive the Emperor’s Touch. Those that accept the Damogir’s seed are sent outside the city to live in relative safety, while the barren ones are handed to the *Get*.”

“Why are the *magata* so feared and despised by the House of the Damogir?”

In my mind, those that were barren were a perfect match for the plague. Cursed, disconnected, and abused, they were beings left empty and unclaimed. They were the perfect weapons, servants, and fodder for the Emperor.

“It’s through our hearts that the Infernal plague takes hold. It has been said that the plague was able to take root after the Damogir planted his seed in hundreds, maybe thousands of Nantine women. Their natural instincts as mothers intertwined with the curse, giving it fertile ground to grow and spread within the mother and the child. People soon realized the connection and did what they could to stem the horrid tide.”

“They discarded their young, further destroying themselves while the curse rode ever higher on the wave of their suffering.”

Dania nodded, “It became an unsolvable trap, no matter how

anyone tried to escape it.”

The bowl of the Qreyl crater had grown into its own version of Death Valley, and the city itself had become a Black Fountain to create a host of demons on our side of the Veil.

“It’s not the trap that kills,” I said. “But whoever is holding the noose.”

Predator or prey, one had to decide whether to try and cut the rope or ignore it and fight the one trying to claim their pelt. If you were prey, you only had one choice, hoping you broke free before the hunter finished his work. As a predator, you could play it either way, and, as plans go, I was opting for the latter option. It might not have been the best choice, but it was all I had to go on at the moment.

I examined Dania as we emerged from the nocturnal corridors of the city, heading to the gem cutters’ street. She was only ten years older than me, yet her brown hair was already streaked with bands of gray. She was missing a tooth on her lower jaw, and her lip carried an old scar, a mark far uglier than the tiny, fresh cut on her ear. Her ink had already faded away to nothing.

“What?” she said.

I could feel her discomfort at my scrutiny. As I looked upon my half-sister, I wanted to wail and scream with her. It was the least that I could do for her and everyone around us. “You weren’t wrong to try and cut the tethers of the curse, and I’m sorry about what happened to your sister.”

I was utterly certain that nobody ever apologized for anything in this realm. It had long been impossible. You had to care about something or someone first.

“Well, I’m sorry for punching you.”

“Only because you almost broke your hand in doing so.”

She grinned, “Yes, but it’s a start, isn’t it?”

With the small smile on her face, it was vastly more than that. It was the seed of freedom and anathema in the eyes of the damned.

Chapter 21

The Reservoir

It didn't stand a chance.

The assassin dropped from the roof of the building beside us as we turned the corner, and I shoved Dania aside, sending her sprawling into the street on our left.

The attacker shrieked, "Magata!" and lunged at the witch with a wickedly familiar claw-blade.

I caught its foot and sent it diving face-first into the ground a few feet short of its mark as Dania scrambled backward. That the attacker had been masked from detection was telling, but the fact that it ignored the bigger threat in its bid for a quick kill was a heinous mistake. *Koki-Ten* was present on both sides yet seemingly along for the ride.

"Hold!" I screamed and kicked its feet out from under it, trying to draw its attention.

"Die!" It shrieked back. The assassin rolled away and got its feet beneath it. Its eyes were grayish, almost human, sporadically flickering fire-red or disappearing beneath an inky black.

There was little that was sane in its expression, and I was fairly certain that I'd heard the extent of its vocabulary, convincing though it was. A Black wave of energy engulfed me, darkening my vision. I drew it in as I reached for my blade. Once despair, a fresh coat of fury wrapped my being as I moved to intercept the Hell-bent Claw.

"Ara, don't!" Dania maneuvered behind me, staring in horror at my fight with yet another *Get of the Damogir*.

Demonic relics clashed several times in the first few heartbeats of

our engagement, and my foe seemed to know my moves and feints before I made them. It didn't take long for me to guess what was aiding the assassin.

"What do you mean, don't?" I hissed, still working on an opening for an end to yet another lost family member. "Keep an eye out for the rest of its pack."

The assassin had left his short sword strapped across its back, another mistake, and I made sure that he wouldn't have the opportunity to retrieve it. I could overcome one demonic assassin, but if three more dropped in behind, we were done.

"You killed the pack, and there hasn't been enough time for more to ascend." Dania seemed pissed, but I hadn't thrown her aside for fun. "That's got to be the Damogir."

The witch's distraction was almost fatal, bringing a smile to the man's face as he lunged once more for the kill. *Koki-Ten* continued to treat me as if I didn't exist, as if we didn't have any connection. The demon's weaving with the soul of the Damogir was giving the claw-wielding young man an advantage by feeding him hints to my every intention.

The enemy had a few tells of its own. I blocked hard and held my ground, keeping the assassin from reaching Dania. As the pressure mounted, I did what any skilled fighter would do. I spun completely around and whipped my blade into the heavy door behind my sister, leaving myself unarmed. The instant the dagger left my hand, I became free of my physical connection to the death-demon, and its unfair influence over the fight waned.

My left vambrace provided a backhanded block of the Damogir's suddenly hesitant strike, and my right followed it around, hammering down hard on his elbow joint as he tried to recover. The pop of the joint was satisfying, and it seemed to stoke fear in the shaded man, as if a mortal soul still existed within. It wasn't acquainted with losing but was about to meet its end.

You don't realize that gray is a color until it is entirely gone. As the man's eyes changed, melting from an almost human gray to an alien black, I could feel a completely new presence take hold. There was nothing *magata* about the attacker. It carried three souls, including

those of the Damogir and the Black Prince Kasaval. The third, that of a death-demon stalked in the shadows between the other two.

Another Black wave roared forth, and the man's eyes darted around me, searching for the blade embedded beside my half-sister. This psychic blast was better than the last, but I was ready for it. My vision never wavered as he charged behind the wave of desperation.

Feeling almost forgotten, I blocked his path and hammered him again, catching him cleanly across the nose and staggering him backward. His eyes wavered back from black to a dazed gray as he switched the Claw dagger into his left hand.

Holding his blade steady between us, the once handsome man snarled, "This one is mine," and plunged the five-inch blade into his own eye, all the way down to the hilt. He froze for an instant and toppled backward like the statue of a deposed king.

Dania shook in fear behind me but sought to reclaim herself, "Feth, but I sort of liked that one. He wasn't as ugly as the others."

I looked back over my shoulder, wishing she would give me a moment to comprehend the suddenness of the attack and the death of yet another sibling.

She offered a weak smile, trying to make amends, "Present company excepted, of course."

I pointed at the victim of a self-assassination. "Why did he do that?"

"The Damogir was losing. He's probably already seated in another of our siblings, getting a rub down or bathing in a pile of gems."

"Somehow, I don't see him interested in either of those things." I yanked my fang-blade from the wall and tucked it away. "He shares a room with the Emperor."

"The Emperor has a reputation for creating six new offspring for everyone that the Damogir destroys. He's probably checking his harem for his next conquest."

"Harem?"

"Just as the Damogir harbors a cast of male offspring for his corporeal use, the Emperor has a fixation with the female ones and is keen on keeping a ready supply of both."

"And you know this how?"

“People talk. Over the years, thousands of women have spent time inside the Damogir’s Hold praying that they aren’t barren.”

“What happens to those that are barren?” I asked.

Dania pointed to the body lying in front of us.

I had to ask, “Did you? Were you?”

“No, I was already of his bloodline. The Emperor wouldn’t even allow the female offspring to participate in the Blood Challenge.”

“But they did, at least on rare occasions. I killed our sister to get this dagger.”

“I guess it depends on who’s in charge at any moment.”

I pulled the claw-dagger, a relic no longer imbued with anything, from the eye of the dead man. We didn’t look anything alike, and I aimed to keep it that way. It took me a minute to gather my nerve, and I rubbed my thumb along the edge of the blade, finding only the slightest imprint of a human soul. *Koki-Ten* had left nothing behind as it fled. It had been a clean, quick kill.

I left my blood on the claw-blade as I handed it to Dania. “His original name was *Kinjo*. Please accept this as a gift from your brother. Through it, you will be able to find me.”

The small connection was a start for both of us and the city at large.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“In searching for knowledge of the plague and the Damogir, I feel like I’ve seen entirely too much of Qreyl today.”

“The days here are long, but the nights are an eternity. That’s how I know that the Emperor is winning.”

“Winning what?”

“His fight with the Damogir.”

We had one more stop to make before the day’s tour of Qreyl was complete. The city held large pools of fresh water in all of its districts, some adorned with fountains and each with pumps and taps, keeping the citizens supplied with fresh, cold water. Dania circled one until she found a tile-covered hatch. It took the two of us to open it, and we left it open as we descended a humid flight of stairs.

On occasion, a landing would offer a lamp and a side opening

into a storage room or even a makeshift barracks, but for the most part, the trip was monotonous and dark, and we were alone for the mile that we descended into the mountain.

The cavern that we found at the bottom was a sanctuary, without a doubt. The stillness of the pool's chilly, silver-black water was as compelling as the silence in our hearts and minds. The unending buzz of the plague's hunger had been left far behind, frozen perhaps with the stoppage of time.

The immense, bowl-shaped underground reservoir was hundreds of yards across and deeper than I could make out. It provided an ample supply of clean water for the city above. Hundreds of lamps flickered on the walls around it, and passages, tunnels, and pipes visited the shrine from all sides. In the distance, unseen water flowed into or out of the pool.

"Dania, where are we?" I whispered.

"The reservoir. The heart of the mountain."

"Poetic and perfectly fitting for Qreyl."

Dania couldn't disagree. "We are in the center of the volcano, a mile directly below the Damogir's Hold. The Lycorn river flows past the mountain on its north side. A dam and detour were constructed to steer the river beneath the volcano and feed the pumps that keep the water flowing upward into the city. The porous volcanic rock filters the water on its way in."

Untainted. That was the thought that stuck in my mind, and I felt compelled to dive into the pool in a vain attempt to wash away the Black. A reverence for the smoothness of the surface held me back. Instead, I hooked my arm around Dania's waist and pulled her close, listening to her heart. I might have stood there for days, enjoying the sight of healing where none had ever been before and pretending that it was my own.

"You are cursed with a frozen heart," she said. "It's a powerful illusion, but I can sense the unreality in it. When have you last faced a witch?"

"This morning?" I replied, nudging her toward the reservoir's edge.

She cuffed me gently, as is the right of any older sister. "You have

suffered plenty before me. Tell me who did this to you.”

I looked around, searching the vast dim room for the darker shadow that I knew must be there. The strain of the long day had been taking its toll.

Dania lifted my hand off of the fang-dagger strapped across my chest. “You’ve been stricken by your own personal plague. You must let it go.”

“I suffer from the Black, the Mad Black.”

“You do, but that’s not the touch of a witch. I can’t help you if I don’t know who did this to you. We are safe here, Ara, so please tell me.”

The creeping feeling of doom that seemed to accompany any witch I met seeped into the vast cavern around me, clashing with Dania’s words of assurance. She spoke of my frozen heart.

I shook my head. “How could you know about that? What if you and she are one and the same?”

Dania’s eyes went wide, “How could I—No!” She shoved me away with all her might.

I stumbled back and over the edge, breaking the surface of the deep pool.

Leather and chain armor can be a lifesaver in almost every situation except that of swimming. In seconds, I was twenty feet underwater, standing on the bottom of the pool in near darkness.

Somehow, I thought death would be colder.

In the distance, a single water-defying flame danced. I turned to face it as it approached. Within the flame, the form of Vigaila Grace appeared, completely ignoring our shared reality and the fact that I was wielding a wicked fang-dagger. Acting as if she didn’t want to scare me away, the witch leaned in and pressed her mouth to mine. It burned, but not in an unpleasant way, and the heat of the kiss flowed throughout my limbs.

Before I knew it, I was naked, and my knife was nowhere to be found. Looking neither old nor young and clothed only in flame, the witch persisted, circling my body, jabbing and poking my skin. I did my best to fight off the fiery kisses that seemed to sustain me. A familiar scar in my side screamed in anger, leaking an iron-tinted

cloud, and soon the water around us began to boil. The blood that flowed was red, not black.

Eventually, the witch grew cold, her naked body lacking the heat to sustain either one of us. I could sense the witch's frustration as we trembled beneath the surface together. It twisted the knife in my side once more and swam off, taking its fading light away.

Lacking any strength, I curled up on the rough stone of the reservoir's bottom, writhing in pain and drowning in bootless fury. I felt utterly helpless. Held in the grip of a plague that would never leave, I had met Qreyl, and it was me.

FETH.

In that instant, the battlefield changed. I was an Infernal warlord, driving my Horde forward. War ascended in a flash over the minions of Pestilence. I breathed out Fury and burned away the enemy that threatened to consume me with disease and despair. The Legions were endless on both sides, but so was my power as I fought through line after line. My wounds were nothing, meaningless distractions to be discarded as I strived to burn away the enemy's curse or turn its weight back upon itself.

Bathed in endless hellfire, the black sand melted beneath my feet; a sheet of glass formed a mirror upon which I trod. I dared to look down and read the lines of another curse, one called Firefanged. I found myself surrounded, trapped yet howling for more, and those that responded to my call suffered a far deeper loss, their ashes strewn on a Black wind. They were my messengers, carrying my fury to the four corners of Hell in their destruction, but in the end, the battle failed, and I stood alone, neither victorious nor vanquished.

A single demon approached, dropping the mask of a familiar witch and donning the over-wrought robes of an Infernal High Priest. The soul was familiar yet alien and connected to the play without a line to memorize—the director, perhaps.

"I am empty," I said. "Ask nothing more."

"Firefanged," he smiled. "To the victor, go the spoils."

"Is it over?" I asked.

"The battle? Yes. The War? Never."

"I am empty!" I screamed. "Ask nothing more!"

The man reached into my side and pulled out a blade dripping with black blood. He chuckled, "Now, you are empty."

His black humor was welcome at that moment, but it still fell flat. I had lost something along the way, and I couldn't say whether it had been discarded, stolen, or melted beneath my feet.

"The sand acknowledges your Fury and resolve. In another world, the ground boils and flows, driven by hearts, and the gaps that divide are too easily filled."

"Feth," I spat, marring the pristine reflection. "In either world, I am empty."

"An illusion can't exist in a vacuum. Open your eyes and enjoy your victory."

Covered in brilliant black glass, the landscape shone for miles around; the uncountable grains of sand had become one. It was almost blinding as it shimmered, an Infernal mirage.

"My eyes are open, and I see nothing but form and the unformed."

"As you say, Firefanged." The high priest replaced his mask and laughed as he tossed me the wicked, blood-soaked dagger. "Forgive the world."

Somehow, I didn't think that word held the same meaning in the Infernal Domain.

The blade carried a demonic curse.

"What is its name?" I asked, surprising the devil.

"Magata," he replied.

I tossed it back. They could define their own reality, but not mine.

"The War must go on." The priest melted back into the form of a succubus witch. Being as empty as I, it was an unfitting owner for the dire weapon.

"As you say," I replied. "But I have my own path to follow."

"Then you will surely fail as you did in the Dungarr Drip."

"My war was never with you, but rather the hunger that consumes us all."

"But that is what I am, and nothing more," she said, licking the dagger clean.

"You are an illusion. A harvester of strife."

"Well, in that regard, you've certainly won," the witch, Vigaila

*Grace, shrieked in laughter as she rode a black flame out of sight.
Beneath me, the glass turned back into sand as a new light arrived for
me to follow.*

Chapter 22

The House of Chains

The world seemed to spin a hair faster than when I'd left it, and perhaps a whole wig's worth as I stood up and staggered into the reservoir's rough-hewn wall. The stone seemed to steady itself as it leaned upon my shoulder, dripping with sweat at the effort. The whole cavern seemed vastly warmer and slicker with humidity.

I was alone, naked, and mostly unharmed. The old scar on my side had changed into a freshly healed wound, but it didn't complain. My soggy clothes, armor, and fang-dagger lay in a pile near the pool. I dragged on my undershorts and looped the dagger's sheath over my shoulder, taking a deep breath. The pool kept its innocent place beside me. How long would it take to heat that much bathwater?

The effort reminded me of Yseria, my bodyguard and best friend in times of adventure. She kept me in the fight, clean and clothed, when I couldn't do it for myself, while we both did our best to drive the other crazy. She was the last one in Company Storm that I'd seen before heading north with Careck, and if I held perfectly still and closed my eyes, I could almost remember our kiss goodbye.

Feeling at home with the solitude of the damp cavern, I scouted carefully around it, exploring its many openings. Some carried a stream downward; others were dry and angled in all directions. Some had stairs going up, others down. The air from the descending staircases seemed fresher to me, and I guessed that they would exit the mountain somewhere far below the rim. I hoped the passages were safe.

After what seemed like hours of searching, I found the opening

that I wanted. The hint of a harem seemed to wander down to the water's edge, and it guided me upward for far longer than I thought possible. I emerged spent, shuffling into a closet attached to a busy laundry room. As I entered the larger room, all the workers bowed and backed away.

"Who will find me the house steward?" I said.

No one lifted their head. I grabbed the worker nearest the main door and shook them, but their blank stare remained, masking their deep fear and making my mind itch at the sight. It was a first for my time within the walls of Qreyl.

I walked out the door and up another flight of stairs in search of daylight and the Damogir. I found daylight first before anyone found me. The Damogir's Hold had plenty of deeply set windows and hidden terraces to watch the city or the sky without being seen. Based on Dania's earlier description, I felt fortunate to have emerged into the cool, bright light of a winter's day.

After the battle in the reservoir below, the only Black energy I carried remained in the dagger as a cage for a death-demon and nothing more. I was as empty as the day and, for the first time in a long time, free of the Mad Black's whispers. I reached out from where I sat on a small terrace, a large flat stone beneath me. Outside the sheer walls of the Damogir's Hold, the city seemed to move in an immeasurably frantic jitter, while within them, the pace seemed different, far slower, almost sedate. After walking through a muted landscape for days, the world seemed to be murmuring its intentions.

The face of Inquisitor Jillian Stone flew like a flag in my mind, and I recalled her first words of introduction.

"You are the Gray Prince. Forgive the world," Jillian had spoken as if that were my sole path to salvation, and she was anything but a harvester of strife.

In my newfound state of clarity, I finally understood her words as a path to healing myself, and I wished she were here to share this warming rock. Why had I left her behind? Careck's ugly face showed itself at that moment, answering the question. He'd been a chief harvester of fear and strife in this world, and it would have been a

crime to allow any of my family to suffer his presence more than was required. Hell, they could barely suffer mine.

Too many clear-sighted friends were missing out on a rare opportunity to see me without all the drama and the Mad Black. They awaited my return from a distance, proving the strength of their hearts and their deep connections.

“Blood Master, you are wanted below,” an elderly gentleman spoke and bowed. His words were careful, yet his face registered a disdain at my poorly clad state.

“And you know me how?”

“Be sure that I knew your mother and follow me.” The man was beyond shrewd in his introduction, leaving me no choice.

“Been here long?” I said as we walked back inside.

Cold and professional as any Gray House killer, the man offered little emotion or a sense of purpose. He was comfortably dressed in a black tunic trimmed in gold over tailored wool pants and slippers instead of shoes.

“Time can be relative, and within the confines of the Damogir’s Hold, it is irrelevant.”

“OK,” I said. “And who are you? Or is that irrelevant too?”

“Quite,” he replied. “But you may call me Fergus. I am the Behcet House Steward.”

“Behcet?”

“The ancient line of the Damogir is named Behcet, and though the Damogir has long forgotten it, I have not.”

“Well, Fergus, I am Ara Storm of House Storm in Colivar.”

“You pretend as much as the Damogir when it comes to your House.”

“Having none, I created my own, and it means everything to me.”

“In that, you are nothing alike.”

We reached a long, windowed corridor that offered a staggered line of inviting, ornate wooden doors. Fergus opened the last with a brass key and led me inside to a well-furnished suite. A host of servants waited for his command, each dressed in the same black and gold apparel.

Fergus handed out the orders, “Please prepare the *Get* for his

audience with the Damogir.”

Finding our introductions lacking, I grabbed the older man’s arm, “I am no one’s get. At best, I am a son, and at worst, I am only Ara Storm.”

“As you say, Master Storm, though your chances of survival might increase given the proper frame of mind.”

My hand clamped even tighter on his arm. “Fergus, you assume too much when it comes to my frame of mind. My House may guide it at times, but no one would dare define it for me, not even the devil that runs this corner of Hell. And, as to our survival, well, that assumes we’re all still alive beneath the plague that devours this city.”

The steward’s eyes squinted as if seeing me again for the first time, and a hint of emotion finally reached his brow. He gave me the slightest of nods, saying, “Thousands of women have survived the Emperor’s Touch over the years, each as unique as Queen Tiasa before them. Maeve Lundin was as strong-willed as they come, and I can see her iron-gray eyes in yours.”

He might as well have punched me in the throat. I backed away, coughing, “My mother was Maeve?”

My ignorance and unease sparked a confused pity throughout the room as if I were even more pathetic for not knowing. By my scant appearance, my forlorn nature should have been clear from the start.

“Though it’s been a few years since I’ve seen her, she wasn’t a woman that any man forgets.”

A discarded boy might do so in his need to survive a painful loss.

“A few years? My mother was here more than a few years ago.”

“As I said, Master Storm, time is relative. The cycle turns differently within Qreyl and even more so within the Hold of the Damogir. It is a gift of the Emperor.”

In my experience, the gifts of the Emperor were never kind, and the fact that I’d stepped into another curse should have bothered me way more than it did. Still, the shock of knowing that I’d met my mother kept everything at bay for the moment and gave me a face that I could curse as easily as forgive. Beyond that, it also offered solid proof of my humanity in the most inhuman place on earth.

“Fergus, what are your intentions here?”

Fergus looked about the room, trying to hide his unease, “No one has ever asked me that before.” The steward’s utter realization that he did have intentions seemed to offer its own shock. “The ruling line of Behcet must survive.”

With the Emperor’s extreme diligence at spreading the Damogir’s seed, how could it not?

Fergus seemed to read my thoughts, “Not only as a bloodline but as a ruling line,” he stated.

Was ignorance another gift of the Emperor?

“And yet you stand by while Niantia falls into ruin? In a few years, maybe a month, there will be nothing left to rule beyond the walls of this hold.” As I sized up Fergus and his misguided thoughts, my hand rested on the hilt of my fang-dagger. I began to pour another layer of rage onto the Black cage within it; this one was my own fresh brew and a bit stiffer than the rest.

Bodies all around me fell prostrate. The house servants trembled in fear, and, in doing so, they drew forth pity where only hunger had ruled for far too long. As *Firefanged*, I could push and pull on the dark energies and emotions of others, and I was astounded at the strange feeling being called up from within me. Images pummeled me at that moment, Cat’s, for one, promising me forgiveness as my frustration destroyed whatever got in my way, and another, a summer breeze that seemed to carry me forward with a future promise of warmth when only winter reigned in my heart. Rae’s face flashed a smile that almost floored me, and the world seemed to shift as if coming down off of a steep hill.

Fergus had gone to his knees, head bowed, and I joined him in my vertigo.

“The Summer Wind blows eternal,” I said. “Do you know what that means?”

Bitterness and loss leaked from Fergus’s eyes. “It was a favorite saying of Queen Tiasa.”

“And the Damogir thought it prudent to adorn her words with a portal to Hell.” Not being a question or an accusation, it was the crux of Qreyl.

“The Damogir said that it would preserve our realm. We all watched in the arena as the demon strode forth, a creature blacker than the night. Some say it looked like a cat, but it was a monster with fire in its eyes, and the Damogir defeated it by simply holding out his hand. As the beast lunged and sank its fangs into his hand, the Damogir plunged a dagger through its eye, showing everyone that he was still the ruler of Niantia and that we had nothing to fear.” He coughed and spat, “We didn’t know.”

“Fergus, the Realm of Niantia is no more. It ended the day the Black Prince arrived, riding upon the death-demon he’d sent to the Damogir. It’s time for everyone to stand up and stop pretending otherwise.”

The steward bowed down again, murmuring, “It is as you say.”

“Now, stand up, all of you, and help me get ready to meet the Damogir.”

By the time they were done, I was, in all appearances, a new man, maybe two. Foremost, I was dressed in the attire of a *Get of the Damogir*. With the fang-blade *Koki-Ten* strapped across my chest, I wore spotless chain and leather armor, sturdy vambraces, and a pristine short sword. I was ready for war, but beyond all that, another miracle had occurred.

I’d found a tarnished mirror in the adjoining bathroom, and the change it showed was striking. Most of all, my gray hair was gone, somehow returned to a natural, sandy brown, and the lines that had adorned my face had softened with a healthy vigor. My eyes seemed more human and less haunted than before. They searched for understanding in a place where none could be found.

Fergus led the way from what was obviously a vast wing positioned on the stronghold’s outer edge, moving inward and up. The windows we passed exposed the hold’s outer wall, allowing a poor view of the city as dusk approached. An unnatural mist seemed to blur the surroundings, and the more I looked, the less I was sure about the time of day. Luckily, the dining hall provided all the answers I needed in the guests seated around a long mahogany table and the smell of spicy food being served. I could barely remember the last time I’d eaten and forgot where I was for a moment as I

scanned the scene.

A young man, one certainly younger than me in body but not mind, held the place of honor with nine young ladies, each perfectly wrought in gowned elegance, seated at the table before him. Dania wouldn't have been disappointed by the man's rugged good looks, blue-gray eyes, and pale blonde hair. Whoever had been the mortician, he was certainly good at his job.

Wearing black over gold tunics and leather armor, guards with long-bladed spears stood along the walls of the vast dining room. None looked familiar, and they all seemed entirely bored by the scene. Safely placed within the eye of an Infernal plague, no one in the room wore the half-masked look of the citizens of Qreyl, nor were their emotions buried out of reach. The surprise was immediate and immense among the emptiness I'd been feeling.

I waited a step inside the door while Fergus spoke with the youthful Damogir. The ladies had been fashioned into courtesans, and their underlying anxiety clashed with their rose-petal smiles and warm cheeks. The women's perfumery varied with each, allowing the Damogir to tell them apart in the throes of passion later, I was sure. I let the scents mix in my mind to avoid causing any offense. Having visited a similar scene at the Queen's Hold only weeks before, I knew the terror that each must have felt by coming here. Servants offered a constant flow of wine and other spirits to keep the ladies in a faux festive mood as they failed to taste the morsels on their plates.

The Damogir didn't seem surprised to see me, as if his kin wandered in every day. He didn't seem all that interested in anything around him, ignoring the wine and the women, but I could feel his steely concentration and the battle raging within him. I was a threat only because I was a distraction, as were the flowers seated around the table. That would eventually change.

Fergus returned and bowed, "The Damogir witnesses your ascension and asks that you have a seat at the far end of the table. As a boon, you may choose your dinner partner from any of the nine seated here."

The Damogir's offer was well-placed.

"Find me later, Fergus. We will have plenty to discuss concerning

the continued existence of House Behcet.”

I was hungry and alone, so I took a slow walk around the long table, scanning the women and the Damogir in turn. He found it amusing. The ladies, not so much. Each had been fed and groomed in preparation for the Emperor’s Touch. To know that my mother had dined here years before may have ruined my appetite, but it didn’t slow me down as I took the calloused hand of the young woman seated closest on the Damogir’s left. She was utterly striking with dark hair and even darker eyes, sitting among a bevy of harshly faded beauties.

Without a word, the young woman stood and followed me to the far end of the table. Among the women present, she cowered the least, and yet, as I clasped her hand, she trembled in terror.

“You have a good eye. That one was my first choice.” The Damogir seemed happy to egg me on. “Be sure to try the wine.”

“I noticed that your cup remains empty,” I replied.

“I don’t drink.”

“A coincidence. Neither do I,” I said. “I find it loosens one’s resolve even as it speeds one’s dagger.”

“True,” he allowed, having already met his match in that regard.

I leaned in toward my dinner companion, “Is the wine any good?”

“For a courtesan, perhaps,” she said.

I couldn’t let go of her hand. “You seem awfully young to be the mark of such an old man.”

“An old man in a young body and not even a touch of gray. I can live with that.”

“I don’t doubt it, and yet you seem troubled.”

The woman looked down. “I recently lost my family. I was told that Qreyl would take away my pain and make me forget, but it hasn’t.”

“We are kindred spirits in that regard, for I also lost my family. Hell, I’ve even lost myself, but in coming here, I’ve found my life again.”

The woman seemed surprised at my good fortune. “Where was it?”

“Deeply hidden by an illusion and the grief that I carried because

of it.”

“What is grief?” she said. “Is it an illusion, too? For that is what I feel, more than anything.”

“No, it is real, whether you have lost someone or not. It is the balance required to make you whole again.”

“I will never feel whole again, ever.” The slightest of tears punctuated her remark.

“I won’t let the Emperor touch you.”

“You, sir, are so much like my brother. But it is already far too late for that.”

“What?” I gulped. “When?”

“Years ago. My father knew the Emperor, and he gave me to him as an offering. The Emperor’s Touch was anything but kind.”

“And yet you survived.”

“I was young. Too young. Both my father and the Emperor knew that, but it didn’t matter. They had made a deal,” she didn’t look up as she spoke. Through a wayward prince’s touch, she was stripped bare once more. She had lost everything at every turn.

I slowly lifted her chin and leaned forward, kissing her gently. “I have met your brother. He asks that you forgive him.”

“Forgive him for what?”

“For not being there when you needed him most.”

“When have you last seen him?” she whispered.

“Why, only this morning, we shared a hot bath.”

For an instant, the girl relaxed and smiled at my joke. She toyed with the golden ribbon in her hair.

Qreyl was fighting back, adding glue to the puzzle before me.

“Dear Lady, please tell me, when was the last time that you saw your brother?”

“It’s been six months, maybe more. My brother leads a complicated life, even when he’s not around.”

I would have guessed less than half of that time had passed, or maybe an illusion leaned against me. It wouldn’t have been the first time. The young woman’s newfound vulnerability was impossible to miss, throwing one more ball in the air before the curtain dropped. Her heart was clouded with gray but held the seed of something new,

something golden.

“A complicated life has never stopped him before, has it?”

“Stopped him from what?”

“Breaking your heart,” I said.

She shook her head, “No, it hasn’t, but my heartstrings were cut when my father gave me away, and I fear that the Emperor will use that to destroy me.” She was utterly right about that.

I looked at the head of the table, catching the eye of the Damogir. He looked upset about something. Perhaps the meat was undercooked, or maybe it was only an illusion, leaving everyone empty at the end of the feast.

“We are hopelessly alike, you and I,” I whispered. “Still, I hope that the devil remembers you.”

This woman had never met me before, not in this life, anyway. She’d known only an empty illusion.

“Oh, and why is that?” She leaned against me, hooking my arm for safekeeping.

“Your brother leads a woefully complicated life, and yet he has returned. You aren’t the same woman that you were before, Ayla’sen. Stow your fears and know that you will be healed.”

Chapter 23

The Death House Dealer

The Damogir of Niantia, a man more prey than power, had disappeared, and in his place, warm within the same handsome young man, sat the true Emperor of Qreyl, the Black Prince. We could all feel the switch coming, ruining the cheeses and sweetmeats of many, and when the Infernal lord finally took over, the young women dropped their teacups and bowed their heads.

Preferring coffee, I stood.

Prince Kasaval took stock of the unfamiliar scene and the interloper. The Emperor had arrived with dessert and the setting of the sun, looking for something sweet. “You prefer them young, don’t you?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to show up. The days around here are such a bore.”

“Then, let me introduce you to the night,” he replied, “After you introduce me to your date.”

My date was fine where she was, sitting behind me with her hand in mine. Once the strongest soul in the room, she quaked with the rest at the Prince’s hellish, hungry voice.

I started in on a familiar thread, “You trespass upon my House. I’ve come to settle a debt.”

“You’re the interloper, *Firefanged*. I owe you nothing, regardless of what the Damogir may have granted.”

“He offered me nothing that I didn’t already have.” I was pleased that Kasaval remained clueless to the world at large and the powers that roamed its shores.

His reach was compact, yet his presence had stirred up plenty across the continent. He replied, "I sealed the contract. This is my domain, and I own everything within it, even the Damogir."

"But the contract ends with the Damogir's demise, does it not?"

"Guards, you may leave," Kasaval chased away the Steward and the bored Glaive-holders lining the walls but kept the women for dessert. "The contract guarantees a suitable shell to the Damogir whenever the current one is ruined, so sit and be civil while I meet those that will be enjoying my company later tonight."

The women's fear bled out as Kasaval stood and circled the dining room. My mind flew about behind him, collecting the soul shuttering energy, pulling it in, and sending it back in a new form. I wasn't the same person that he'd met before either. I'd learned to defend myself and my House when it mattered most.

Kasaval reached Ayla Storm, his eyes soaking in the black dress that she wore. The tailor of House Behcet deserved a medal and a quick beheading for his skill. The Black Prince reached out to stroke the young woman's hair, and I nudged her through our link. Ayla's hand shot out, slapping the man hard across the face, forcing him a half-step back in surprise.

My connections to my family had been severed ever since I'd entered the Nantine capital. Ayla was a beacon beyond measure, a lighthouse on the shore of a cold, forgotten harbor.

"Don't touch what isn't yours," I said, blocking Kasaval's swift reply with my shiny left vambrace.

"By the Damogir's consent within the contract, all Nantines are mine," he hissed.

"Who said that she's Nantine?"

"Then she should never have been allowed into the city." The Emperor threw a wall of Black energy into the room, a tantrum of hellish proportions.

I'd faced *Greol-hjag* demons that could channel the Black straight through the Veil from Hell. Kasaval couldn't top that. I collected all of the disease and despair, changing it into a more useful form for a demon in exile.

The demonlord could pull energy from the city around us in a far

broader yet utterly finite connection. The Infernal plague had slowly siphoned off the despair of Qreyl, and after an incomprehensible number of years, the citizens were almost tapped out. They had to be from the frustrated look on the Pestilent Prince's face.

I could catch whatever he threw in this fight. "Already tiring, Kasaval? These ladies will be sadly disappointed by your efforts tonight."

I'd said it as a dig into the mind of the Black Prince, a pointed distraction, but three of the women at the table wet themselves right there. One fainted. There was simply too much twisted tension flying about the room.

"Ayla, call Fergus and get these women out of here. The dinner party's over."

Kasaval smiled in recognition. "Ayla'dune, the daughter of Tilikum. She was an offering of immense pleasure and pain. Her blood belongs to me."

I may have growled. I couldn't help it. I drew *Koki-Ten* and held it to the young man's eye, pushing my own burst of Black Fury into his core, "Never take what you can't hold."

Scalded, the demon-prince's attention seemed to return to the situation at hand. It began to laugh, "*Firefanged*, I wouldn't dare, and yet I hold you here. Perhaps it is time that we end the insults and begin the negotiations for our mutual release."

It had always been a trap; the size of the noose had been the only unknown. Reaching to the borders of the Realm of Niantia, it held vastly more than the four souls that struggled to tear each other apart. The Infernal contract, as stale as the blood used to make it, had made that action almost moot.

From the stronghold's West Tower, hoisted above the outer wall of Qreyl, Kasaval directed the Horde. Strung out in a loose ring around the city, it marched in a counterclockwise direction through the caldera more than a hundred feet below us. From our commanding view, only a small fraction of the massive Horde was visible at any one time. With its incredible size, it offered a menagerie of lesser demons dwarfing any incursion that I'd encountered in my brief

years as Vigil Storm.

Watching the forlorn effect on my face, Kasaval couldn't help but gloat. "A score less than ten thousand demons as of today. Only in Hell could the Horde present itself with such power."

In the Outer Domain, the Horde was world-ending in its enormity. Taking more than an hour to walk past us, it didn't cast forth a Black Wind like the one that had roamed the Nantine plains. It had no need to plant seeds of dread and despair on a city already addicted to those baser emotions.

"And you planned to show me its secret, or was that the Damogir speaking?"

The rivalry between the Damogir and the Emperor was almost as impressive as the Horde it had wrought. The two souls were locked in a deal that grew more torturous by the day, which, when I thought about it, was probably standard fare in the Infernal Domain.

Kasaval chuckled, "What is a secret but a fact that has been omitted from the reality that we share."

Having seen this sort of demonic presence before, a chaotic mass that fed off a city without destroying it, I achingly realized that the Horde below lacked one critical feature. "Where are the Hell-knights?"

The tower shook with the Black Prince's mirth. In an instant, the Horde and the walls that surrounded Qreyl became an unbroken snare with the blood of thousands laid at its center. I could only reel as Kasaval gave the rope a hard, swift yank with his dry, wicked laugh.

"The Hell-knights have been freed from the contract and sent home. *Koki-Ten* made it clear to the Damogir that that was your method as you bargained with the Horde that roamed the Nantine Plains. What will you do now, *Firefanged*? What is your next move?"

I'd negotiated for control of the roaming Horde and done my best to destroy the excess generals that led it, but that was beside the point. *Koki-Ten* had sent a message behind my back, informing the Damogir of my tactics and motivations, and the Emperor had responded in a most devilish way. Having built his own version of Hell on our continent, Kasaval had locked it up by throwing away the

key. In doing so, the Black Prince had doomed all but the Infernal contract holder to eventual destruction. The trap widened in my mind, reaching friends far across the continent.

To any alpha *Kjaira*, negotiations were a waste of time. One must have complete control of any situation to alter one's reality in a suitable direction. *Koki-Ten* was connected to all of the players in this Infernal game and could see everyone's cards. It dealt with each accordingly. That was a given.

Standing in that tower with Kasaval's putrid grin wearing me down, I leaned out the window and vomited on an ant-demon far below. It was a glancing strike and completely ignored by the Hellion.

Kasaval took it as my surrender and held out his hand, making an offer he knew I couldn't refuse, "Hand over the surviving fang, and we can begin our own cycle, vying for supremacy in the Outer Domain. It won't be dull with you around."

As plans go, it was top-notch. Kasaval had somehow stymied the Infernal High Prince with his far-reaching scheme, and he'd snared a ready rival to throw into the mix. Or so he thought.

The High Prince had pulled a warlord of the Infernal Cycle off the table, not because he'd been impressed with Hal-Raekorn's ability to drive his faction to victory, but because of the way the Black entity had surprised everyone by blinding his enemy to the real threat. It was a skill worthy of the title *Firefanged*. The High Prince's decree had forced the Infernal House of Hal-Raekorn to sit aside and collect its Black power without the chance to spend it. Drawing on that cache of energy alone, I could make Kasaval rue the day that he'd slipped through the Veil, even as we watched the world burn down around us.

I coughed up blood as another vision of the Infernal plague struck; Kasaval made sure that we were even in the tally of well-timed psychic body blows. The Prince had been saving that one.

Feth.

"Stop that," I hissed. I had enough spinning in my head at the moment.

I covered the hilt of *Koki-Ten* with my hand, drawing Kasaval's

attention back to that which it desired most, and tapped into my store of Fury, the rapid accumulation of Black that jacketed my soul. For a warlord, it was a mind-saving reserve of dark energy, and it kept Kasaval's Pestilent pressure at bay for the moment.

Kasaval, a Low Prince chasing an undue promotion, knew that it had won but ignored the fact that the *Kjaira* was as much a complication as a necessity for its schemes. The contract required *Koki-Ten's* presence as a weapon of terror and domination in the hands of the Damogir. The Damogir yearned for its full power in his bid to ascend further and partake in the nascent cycle on a more equal footing with the Emperor.

Certainly, as apocalyptic futures went, I would be a bigger threat with *Koki-Ten* than without it, and so would the Damogir. Still, Kasaval could count on the Damogir's support, forcing him to be an ally in its schemes. For decades, the Emperor had done so, and yet, the demonlord still strived to be unshackled from the Infernal contract's constraining reality. The Horde's readiness mocked Kasaval's inability to expand freely beyond the caldera of Qreyl and the borders of Niantia.

"Before we proceed, I have a few concerns," I said. "How can you exist independently and incarnate with the Damogir still hosting your mind and soul?"

It was a weakness that had to have been covered in the contract or negotiated away in the end.

"I was supposed to inhabit the Queen, but another soul in exile crossed into her before me. When her daughter was born, I found the girl to be a suitable shell, but again, I was foiled when the Queen killed herself, and the *Kjaira* soul jumped to protect the daughter."

I pointed out the obvious, "There are other players in this game." I was counting on it.

"Pestilence thrives with patience, and there are other suitable offspring, or perhaps that young tart that hung on your arm earlier. Her blood has gained a savory twist that would suit me perfectly."

I fought the Emperor's attempts to goad me further. My rage had already sharpened its edge at the sadistic reason for their curse and their rampant procreation. It offered Kasaval and the Damogir plenty

of suitable human vessels to inhabit, but their stock wouldn't last forever in an all-out war.

"The *Get of the Damogir* were hollow weapons to be filled. The former owner of this fang would have been suitable as well until I destroyed her."

"Quite, as would your sister in Fugaku. *Koki-Ten* was more than thorough in describing her, and like you, I am naturally drawn to any *magata*, though for vastly different reasons." Kasaval licked his youthful lips, smiling, "Don't take what you can't hold, *Firefanged*."

I didn't need to be reminded. "Never."

"Excellent. Our jousting during the cycle will be most fascinating as you try to defend your harem. You will find that when it comes to distance, the plague can eventually overcome anything, and it knows what I like."

There was one being from which I'd never gained any distance, and perhaps I should have from the start. My other *Kjaira* companions had fought fiercely to save me from *Koki-Ten's* grasp, and yet I still struggled to free my mind from the trap of the alpha's influence. In the end, I found myself caught in another trap with infinitely greater pain and long-term consequences.

Kasaval saw the angst splayed across my face and couldn't resist, "The death-demon was right all along. In its despair, your heart begins to feed me. As *Firefanged*, you aren't fully immune to my reach."

With those words, Prince Kasaval reminded me of the weapons within my reach and sealed his fate. He had found his enemy's weakness.

"And yet, you need me to balance your cycle, even if I must joust with a weaker lance," I countered. "What did it cost to get you through the Veil without the High Prince's consent?"

Kasaval glanced out the window, gloating further, "I sacrificed my entire Horde at the Battle of Black Sands, knowing that Qreyl would build me another on this side of the Veil."

He sneered, "Don't look so surprised. Hal-Raekorn was a willing accomplice, taking credit for the victory and providing the cover I needed for my scheme. Only I had the power to blind the Pestilent

Horde, and it didn't take long for the High Prince to see through the ruse, but by then, it was too late. For the crime, your House of War was suitably punished, exiled, and branded with the title *Firefanged*."

I'd gotten a different version of the story from the House of Hal-Raekorn during one of my nocturnal visits to a dive bar in the middle of nowhere, but Kasaval's twist made far more sense, and it matched what *Koki-Ten* had told me months before. *Firefanged* was an Infernal curse and nothing more. In winning, Hal-Raekorn had become the fall guy in a fallen domain, and unless things were made right, the House of War would remain imprisoned for eternity.

I couldn't stomach the thought. I released my grip on the silent hilt of *Koki-Ten*, reconsidering my position and my offer. "I have learned a considerable amount from *Koki-Ten*, a true weapon without equal. Surely it can teach me to withstand the grasp of your slow-witted plague, and once this world is dead, all but us three, it will be you that will fall for all eternity."

Kasaval spat, "But the Damogir is—"

I cut him off, yanking on the snare that held us all in place, "Only one of us is bound to the Damogir. He can join you in Hell, for that is where he belongs, and that is where his citizens already exist, serving him in the blackened eternity of his broken mind. Even in your counterfeit cycle, it will be the contract holder that calls the shots, not you."

I laughed anyway, calling the bluff of the devil, the devil and *Koki-Ten*.

The Hell-prince took a step back, "What do you want?"

"I want that," I pointed out the window at the Horde. "We must begin as equals if the Cycle of the Outer Domain has any chance at a sustained reality."

Kasaval's eyes glowed in an ever-deepening red. "But the Hell-knights are gone, and the contract has none left to share."

Koki-Ten had known this all along. It had known everything, and as with my dead brother Careck, it had only shared what it cared to share with me, leaving me to puzzle out the gaps or weasel the information out of the newly doubtful Prince of Pestilence.

"The Damogir is holding the high card, it seems, over both of us,"

I said. “How were you going to end the contract and free yourself from his grasp? Surely, he wasn’t going to grant you the freedom of a worldly incarnation without some exorbitant payment to level the scales.”

Kasaval knew I wasn’t going to join its gambit. His hellish eyes squinted in frustration as they locked on to mine. In doing so, they failed in their attempt to lie by omission. I already knew what he wanted.

Recalling my very first encounter with a Black entity, I went straight for the kill. My mark wasn’t the demon prince or the human shell standing mutely before me but the brazen cycle for which Kasaval hungered. The Damogir was the key to the Horde, but *Koki-Ten* was the key to Kasaval’s emerging reality, and, as traps go, it was time to sprinkle some blood within mine.

“I have a better solution.” I drew out *Koki-Ten*, capturing Kasaval’s rapt attention. “One that will keep both of you from advancing any further in your schemes.”

I held out my empty hand and plunged the dagger downward.

Kasaval screamed, “No!” and swatted my hand aside. The demon prince caught the fang-blade through his vessel’s hand in an attempt to fulfill its dark deal with the contract holder.

In that instant, *Koki-Ten* was allowed to move. Carrying its prison with it, the *Kjaira* flowed out of the dagger and into the Damogir’s heart, embracing the souls entwined around it.

“I have won!” Kasaval held sway for a moment, ignoring the Damogir, the night-stalker, and the walls that surrounded them.

The souls of the Emperor and the Damogir fought each other for control as the death-demon arrived. Following the contract’s demands, *Koki-Ten* wove itself into the Damogir’s checkered soul and absorbed the shard of its own soul that the ruler still carried. In an instant, the *Kjaira* was almost whole.

Almost.

As *Koki-Ten* settled in around his heart, the Damogir of Niantia grew in strength and wrestled control back from the Black Prince, howling in triumph, “Victory is mine!”

The tower around me shook in his ascension, but it wasn’t

enough. I still held the fang-dagger's hilt and tapped it with my mind, checking on the death-demon and its many strings. My blood bonds were a crude yet unbroken cord around the battle of dark souls.

"To the victor, go the spoils," said *Koki-Ten*, nothing more than a whisper in my mind.

I had missed that wicked voice in my head. Weapons weren't your friend, but they could be a familiar comfort in the darkest moments of one's day.

"As you say." I pulled on the death-demon and its cage of Black Fury, drawing it back into the fang-dagger like a puppeteer ending a performance. *"Back into the box with you."*

Unbreakably chained to the soul of *Koki-Ten*, the Damogir was swept along with the Emperor, both wrapped in the same Black bubble. The cage filled Second Fang with a potent and befuddled mix of souls.

For the past two years, the Infernal plague's visions had imprisoned my inquisitor in a harsh blanket of fear and inner disintegration. A Black sorcerer had done his best to free her. Kasaval had no such help as it boiled and slammed itself into the Black bars of its prison, burning itself further for the effort.

The handsome, youthful host of the Damogir of Niantia collapsed on the tower's stone floor as I removed the dagger from his hand. In a final heroic act, I resisted the sudden urge to kick him where it counts.

In winning, both the Emperor and the Damogir had lost. The Damogir had needed the *Kjaira's* power to fend off the Emperor's growing control over their partnership and had gotten that with the return of *Koki-Ten's* dominant shard. In wrangling control back from Kasaval, he'd ended up chained to an alpha death-demon that was chained to a fallen House of War.

The Emperor had intended to break free and gain control of the Horde to start his own cycle of unreality. Kasaval had to have planned for the Horde's control going to whoever controlled the Damogir's soul. The Black Prince would never have been able to take ownership of its final payment otherwise. With the return of *Koki-*

Ten's soul, Kasaval had acquired the payment for release but had come up one shard short.

With all relics accounted for, only one imbued fang of *Koki-Ten* remained, and all of the other claws were vacant. The dagger of the Second Fang should have contained the soul of *Koki-Ten* in its entirety. If it had, the Emperor could have claimed its freedom and wriggled free before I slammed the prison door. Unfortunately, the Hell-bound partners had made the mistake of making a deal with an alpha *Kjaira* at its core. I'd been there and done that, and it didn't end well.

In losing, *Koki-Ten* had won. Upon the death of Bengla, the former Second Fang of the Damogir, a vicious battle had raged between several *Kjaira* souls, and *Koki-Ten* had ended up retreating. In doing so, it had split its soul into two. One soul shard went back into Second Fang, and the other shard went into a fang relic from an entirely different *Kjaira*. I'd never fully understood the reason for the split until Kasaval let slip that the soul of *Koki-Ten* was the crux of his deal with the Damogir. In that moment, it was all I could do to not laugh.

I'd left the other fang-dagger hidden in an underground vault beneath an orphanage in Maidenhall and been suitably harangued for the brilliant idea. My only disappointment was the fact that neither Ben Heck nor Laila Storm would see the final result of that decision.

In its cramped prison, the Black Prince remained mute, perhaps stunned at the unexplained turn of fortune. I hoped it liked the view. I certainly did. Kasaval would remain chained to the contract holder until the soul of *Koki-Ten* was fully restored, and even then, its new prison could only be unlocked by Hal-Raekorn or the High Prince itself.

The alpha *Kjaira*, suddenly almost whole, remained impossibly chained to the schemes of a Hell-prince and a House of War. Amid everything, *Koki-Ten* had the foresight to arrange for its release and rebirth on the far side of the Veil. I would honor that deal, but first, I needed to sort the immense Horde and the Infernal plague that lived within the people of Qreyl. The hunters had been caught, but their

trap still remained around the necks of everyone.

I looked out the West Tower window again. “*Halt*,” I shouted out in my mind.

The Horde stopped in its tracks, and its weight settled on my shoulders.

Feth.

Struggling to breathe, I tucked the dagger away and ran from the tower atop the curtain wall. Behind me, the howling began.

Bar Sinister

The House of Strife

“You said you weren’t going to play, and yet, here you are, wearing a dagger with my House’s blood on it.”

Memet stared into his drink, trying to sort out what he’d done. The desperation had been unreal as *Firefanged* had walked away from his offer. “It isn’t your House, not anymore.”

“Hell, it isn’t,” I said, proving him wrong by my tone. “We may have reached a stalemate in our negotiations, but he’ll have to return soon. We all know it.”

Rei-Seeck was as silent as the bar around us. The cinders that constantly rattled the door had ceased as well, leaving us alone to our slurring thoughts, and I slowly realized that I’d never left the Cycle after all. Like any Infernal Warlord, I was simply maneuvering far behind enemy lines.

“Memet, you were supposed to blind him to his reality and keep him feeding us his power.” I slammed my fist on the bar counter, cracking it in two. “What happened?”

“He was in our grasp, and the plague took him.”

“We both know that’s a lie. His heart was already severed, making him immune to the Pestilent plague.”

“The illusion failed. At a critical moment, he perceived the lie, and it failed. I tried to restore it, but with his new awareness, he’s become immune to my spells.”

“Curses,” I said. “And the dagger?” It was a soul-stealer—a true weapon of kings.

“Protection,” Memet replied. “From whatever comes next.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“From the bottom of a bay in the Outer Domain, if you’d believe it.”

Rei-Seeck stood up and walked toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I growled.

“I’m in the wrong house,” she answered a question that I hadn’t asked.

“To which House do you belong?”

Introductions would have been a plus some time ago. Now, they were only insults.

“Exile. MY House is Exile.”

The door slammed shut behind her.

FETH.

Coming Next:

Storm Sister